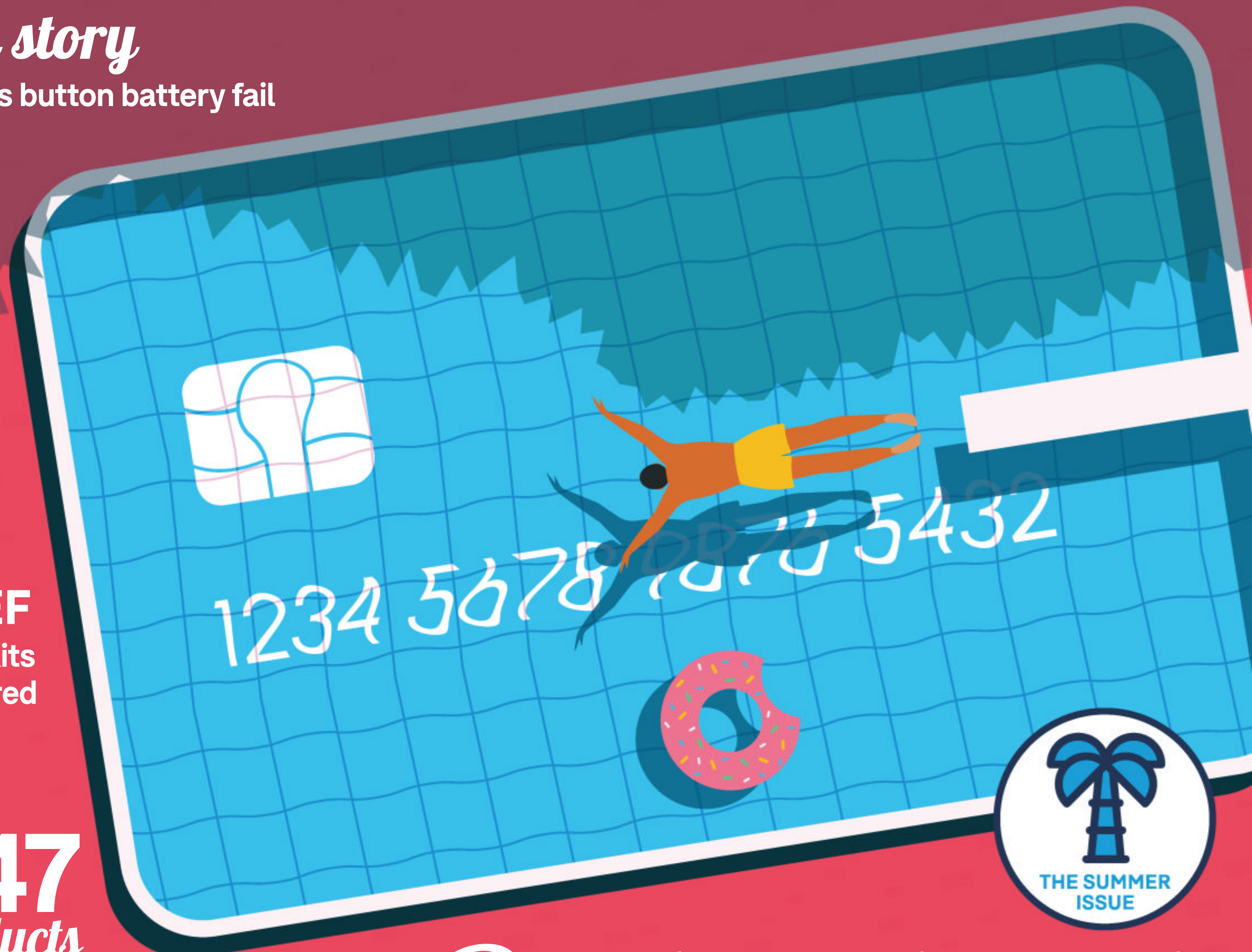
DECEMBER 2024 / JANUARY 2025

CHOICE

Toy story

Temu's button battery fail



YES CHEF

Meal kits delivered

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- TVs
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- Blenders
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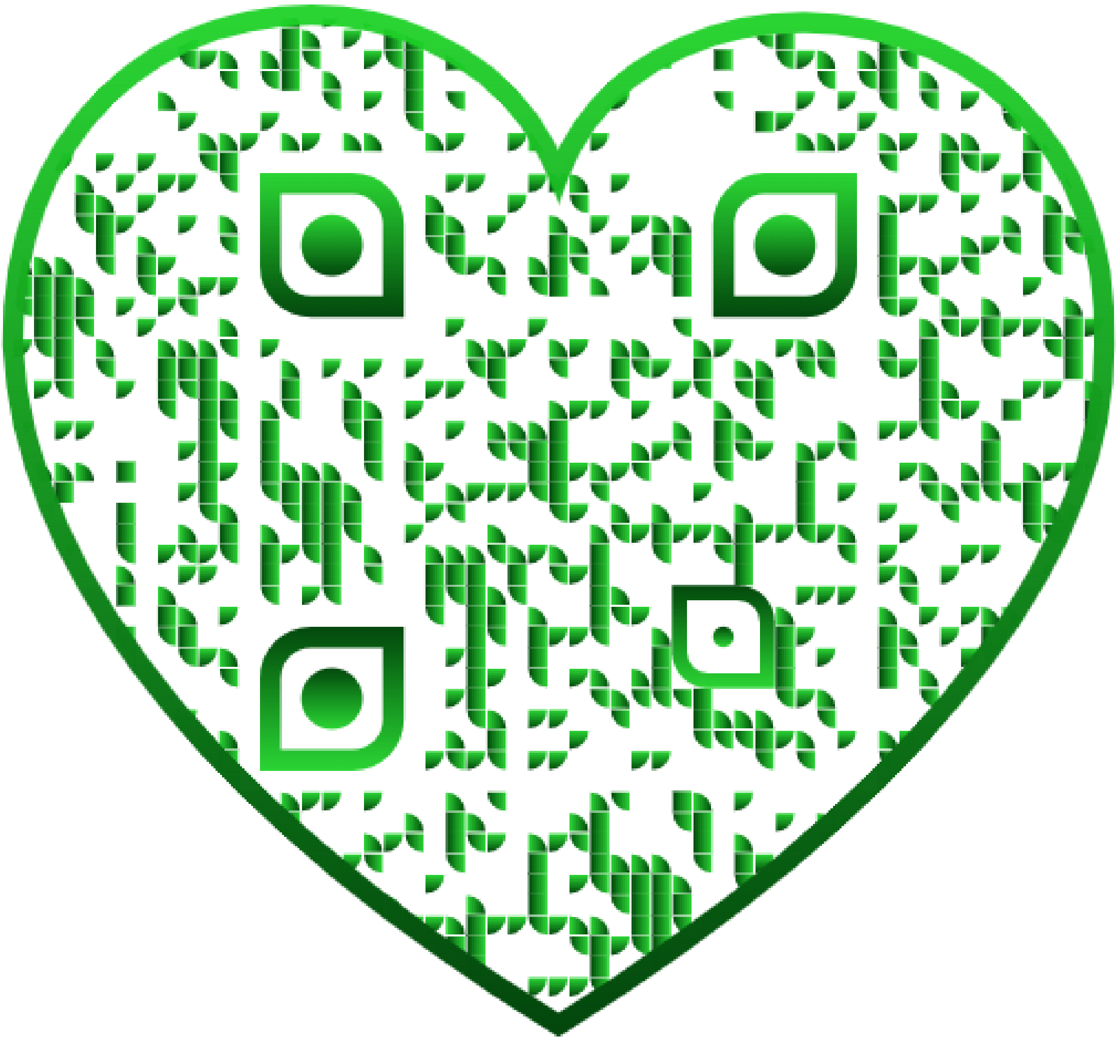
- Translation devices
- Dishwasher detergents

THE SUMMER ISSUE

Budget break

Save these holidays with our guides to travel money, cheap fuel and bulk groceries

Plus Refund rights, international travel insurance & more



Endless summer

Where did the time go?

The passage of time is truly a terrifying thing. It can't be summer already, can it?

Feels like yesterday I was writing an editorial about summer and how much I loved it – but now spring has sprung and I'm writing a new editorial about another summer, another heatwave. It's ridiculous. The days fritter past, the seasons turn without mercy, blah blah blah...

OK, so maybe I'm feeling a wee bit old. Just the other day I sent my oldest son for his high school trial day. Terrifying. He got to meet his new classmates, get a taste of high school life. How is it high school time already? Not that long ago I was changing nappies and scooping poop out of the bath, now he's asking for a low taper fade at the hairdressers. A low taper fade?

Son, I apologise. I'm a 43-year-old-man. My best years are behind me. How do you expect me to know what a low taper fade is? I'm still wearing skinny jeans and ankle socks.

Seasons come and go, but they're cyclical in nature. There will always be another winter, another autumn. They come around and we say, "damn that came around quick", but the existential dread is minimal. Children, on the other hand, are walking, breathing reminders of our own mortality.

Every time one of my children hits some sort of milestone I radiate with pride, but then comes that tap on the shoulder – that's the last time I'll drive him to primary school, carry him to bed, change a nappy. One second they're in your arms, as you pace endlessly trying to get them to sleep, next you're shaking them at 8am because they're too lazy to wake up in time for school.

> **How do you expect me to know what a low taper fade is? I'm still wearing skinny jeans and ankle socks**

The days are long, but the years are short. That's the old cliché, but the older you get the shorter those years become – especially when you have kids. There's something about the endless rotation of school runs, sports games, that makes time dissolve. It fritters away like gold dust and you never get it back.

My wife and I often talk about it – the grind of it. The fact we have very little time for ourselves, that we signed up for this, that we should appreciate it because it will soon be gone. But what happens when they're gone? When we're no longer embroiled in the everyday chaos of parenthood.

Will the days become slow again? I have no idea. Part of me hopes so. But another part knows that one day I'll long for the days I'm currently enduring; that when my house is empty and I can hear the slow, endless ticking of the clock, I'd probably empty my bank account to travel back in time, and scoop poop out of the bathtub one more time.

Actually, maybe I'll skip the poop part.

Thanks as always for the support. Enjoy this month's issue!

Mark Serrels
CHOICE Editorial Director
Email: mserrels@choice.com.au

CHOICE

CHOICE gives you the power to choose the best goods and services, and avoid the worst. Wherever possible, we pay full price for the products we test, so we remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising or freebies from industry. We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is almost entirely funded by membership. Membership includes access to services such as CHOICE Help and the Voice Your Choice research program. Our product ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys. We also research a wide range of consumer services, reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate their quality and claims.

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LIQUID BLISS P46

CHOICE magazine provides a selection of our top product reviews. We can't always include all the models we've tested, but you'll always find the products that scored the best. To view complete results for all our tests, go to **choice.com.au**, or call Customer Service on **1800 069 552** to add full online access to your membership package.

IMAGES: GETTY

CHECKOUT

The latest consumer news in brief

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CHOICE celebrates two big consumer reform announcements

In October, the government announced plans to make two big changes that will make Australia's consumer protections even stronger – a new law banning unfair business practices, and penalties for businesses that unfairly refuse to honour consumers' rights to a refund, repair or replacement.

A ban on unfair business practices could cover a range of tricks and traps such as dynamic ticket pricing, costly gym memberships that are almost impossible to cancel, and pre-checked extras at online checkouts. This huge consumer win should bring Australia's consumer protections in line with many other countries, and make sure the law catches up with what people already expect from businesses.

Similarly, introducing strong penalties will create a disincentive for businesses that flout consumer laws by denying people their consumer guarantee rights to a repair, refund or replacement. This change will support businesses that are already doing the right thing, and mean consumers can shop with peace of mind knowing that they're better protected if something goes wrong.

We've been calling for these important reforms for years. Thank you to the tens of thousands of CHOICE supporters and members who have joined these campaigns along the way, whether by signing a petition or sharing a tip-off or story. This huge step forward is only possible because you made your voices heard. Together, we'll keep fighting to make sure these important changes make it over the line.

JORDAN CORNELIUS

Correction

On p18 of *CHOICE* Nov 24, we said that in Australia, Facebook's advertising revenue was between $4.7 billion and $5.1 billion in the year to June 2022. This is actually the combined advertising revenue of Facebook and Instagram (both of which are owned by Meta).

People power puts card surcharge reform on the agenda

In mid-October, the Reserve Bank of Australia released a consultation paper about card surcharges. The government joined the party by announcing it was prepared to ban debit card surcharges. Payment surcharges – those extra fees added at the checkout for paying by card – have been forced onto the national agenda largely because of a clear message from the general public that current practices are not working.

CHOICE members and supporters have been vocal about the need to address issues with card surcharging, including excessive fees and a lack of consistency and disclosure. We've heard the message and are kicking off a campaign to ensure that the RBA's consultation leads to good consumer outcomes.

The CHOICE campaign is calling for a fair way to pay. To us, this means not being charged extra for paying with your own money, and making sure big companies involved in the payments system are not gouging consumers or small businesses. We're getting involved in the RBA consultation and will keep public pressure on the government to ensure consumers benefit from this process.

TOM ABOURIZK

IMAGES: GETTY

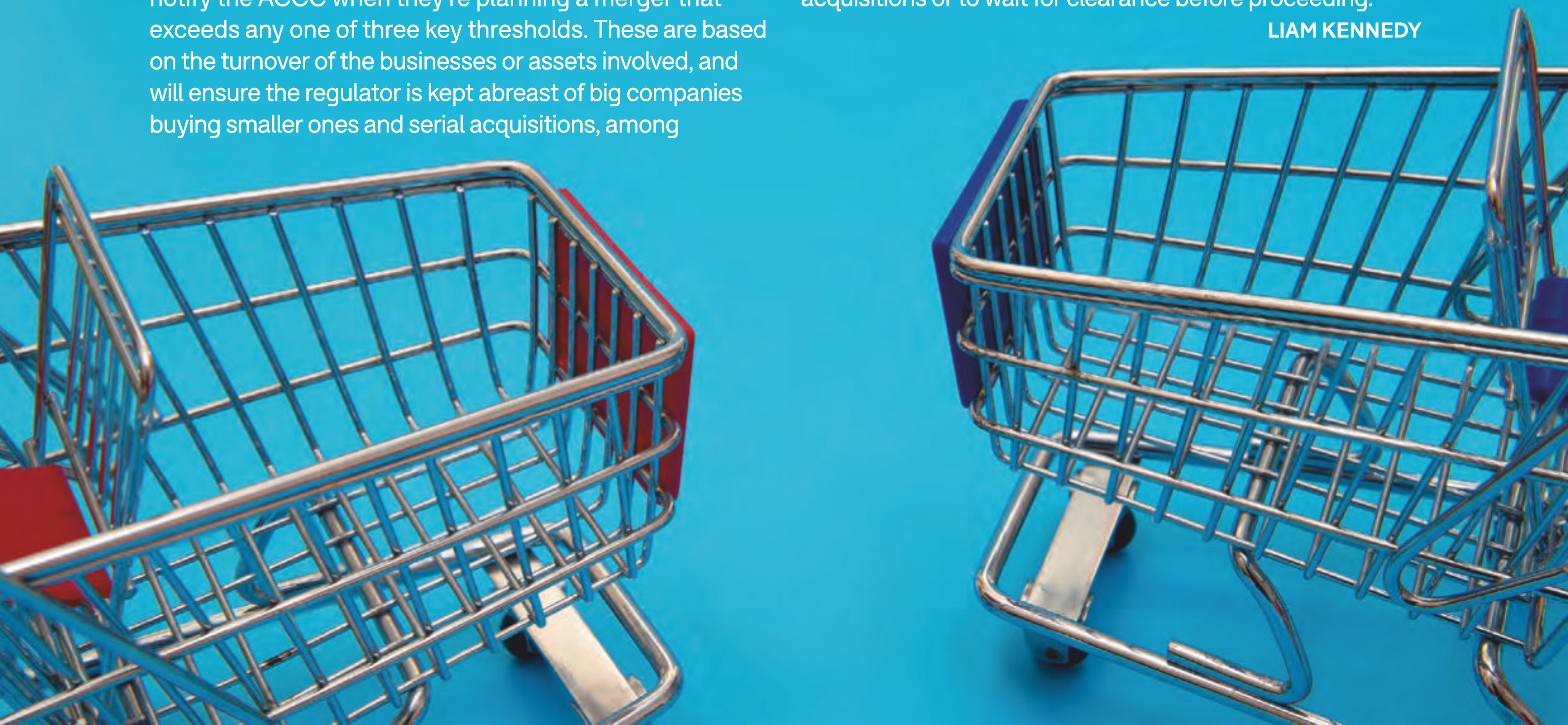
New laws to scrutinise supermarket mergers

The federal government is pushing ahead with an overhaul of Australia's merger laws, saying it wants the ACCC to investigate every takeover in the supermarket sector. The competition regulator has welcomed the introduction of the legislation into parliament, saying the new rules will help it identify and prevent anti-competitive acquisitions in all parts of the economy.

The government's plan is to require businesses to notify the ACCC when they're planning a merger that exceeds any one of three key thresholds. These are based on the turnover of the businesses or assets involved, and will ensure the regulator is kept abreast of big companies buying smaller ones and serial acquisitions, among other developments. The government will adjust these thresholds to allow the ACCC to investigate all mergers it's concerned about. In particular, the Treasurer says, this will ensure the competition regulator is notified of, and can review, any takeovers in the supermarket sector.

Once it has reviewed a proposed merger, the ACCC will then decide if the merger can continue. Currently, companies aren't required to notify the ACCC of proposed acquisitions or to wait for clearance before proceeding.

LIAM KENNEDY

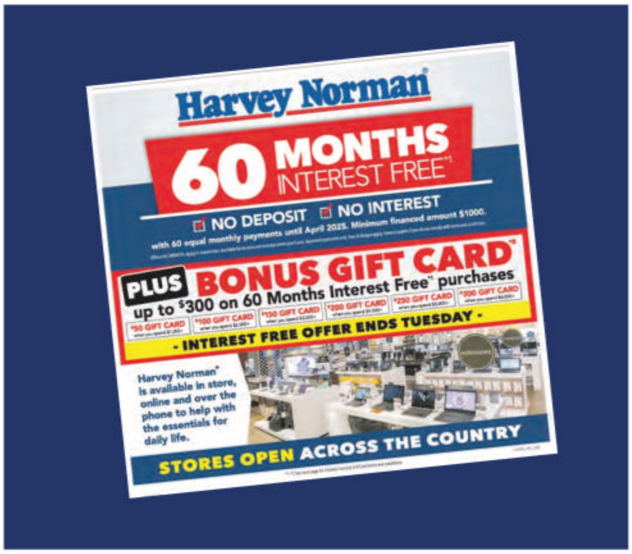


Harvey Norman's misleading interest-free offer

When we handed a CHOICE Shonky Award to Harvey Norman in 2020, it was because the retailer had entered into what we considered an unholy alliance with the firm Latitude Financial. Harvey Norman was signing up customers to Latitude cards at point of sale, meaning customers instore were being given the ability on the spot to buy something without a proper check by the card issuer that the purchase was appropriate to their financial situation. The Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) took an interest in the Harvey Norman/Latitude Finance partnership around the same time, and the recent win by the regulator in the Federal Court against both companies shows just how dubious their interest-free offers can be.

The issue for ASIC was that advertisements for the Harvey Norman/Latitude Finance 60-month interest-free offer neglected to make clear that you needed to sign up to a credit card to access it. Deputy chair Sarah Court says the regulator "took this case because we believed many consumers may have been unaware of the financial arrangements they were entering into when they bought everyday products at Harvey Norman stores. In some cases, this may have meant they paid considerably more for purchases than they expected".

ANDY KOLLMORGEN



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with 60 equal monthly payments until April 2025. Minimum financed amount $1000.

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Harvey Norman® is available in store, online and over the phone to help with the essentials for daily life.

STORES OPEN ACROSS THE COUNTRY

QBE taken to court for false loyalty promises

Customer loyalty in the financial services sector often goes unrewarded. In fact, existing customers often pay more than new ones. But it's even worse when an insurance company promises its customers loyalty discounts and then fails to deliver them. Such is the story with QBE Insurance, which was recently taken to court by ASIC.

Between July 2017 and September 2022, the insurance giant made statements and sent renewal notices promising discounts on premiums for a range of general insurance products, including home, contents and car insurance. About 500,000 customers were told they were about to save some money, but then QBE apparently walked away from the offer.

"The failure by insurers to deliver on pricing promises is a key priority for ASIC and we will continue to take action to hold insurers to account," says ASIC deputy chair Sarah Court.

"Where insurers make discount promises to renewing customers, they need to have robust systems and controls in place to make sure their customers receive the discounts they were promised."

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

CBA hit with $7.5 million spam penalty

Between November 2022 and April 2024, Commonwealth Bank sent about 170 million emails to Australians that lacked one critical element – a way to unsubscribe from receiving further emails. Failing to give recipients that option meant the emails were classified as spam per the Spam Act, which is overseen by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA).

ACMA chair Nerida O'Loughlin says the "vast scale" of the non-compliance is not okay, which is why CBA was slapped with a $7.5 million penalty.

"Australians are sick and tired of this kind of spam intruding on their privacy and it's clear CBA did not have its systems in order. The rules are clear: if a message includes marketing content or direct links to marketing content, it is a commercial message and must give people the option to unsubscribe. We have seen several companies get this wrong and businesses are on notice to check how they are classifying messages as commercial or non-commercial."

It wasn't the bank's first transgression. In May 2023, CBA paid a $3.55 million penalty for sending 65 million emails without working unsubscribe functions. Over approximately the last 18 months businesses have paid over $20 million in spam penalties imposed by the ACMA.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

IMAGES: GETTY / ASIC / QBE / COMMONWEALTH BANK

CommonwealthBank

Government streamlines product safety standards

The federal government has released draft legislation to streamline product safety standards, saying it will save businesses $5 billion over 10 years.

Under the new laws, businesses will be able to import products without duplicating testing and compliance measures, provided the products have been tested and are found to comply with equivalent overseas safety standards. It's hoped this will lower the cost of household products and offer greater options for consumers.

"This change will ensure Australian businesses aren't falling behind the rest of the world, while delivering savings on unnecessary costs without putting the safety of Australians at risk," Assistant Treasurer Stephen Jones says.

The legislation also ensures that compliance requirements in Australia do not fall out of step with best practice standards around the world as they are updated.

JARNI BLAKKARLY

Qantas ordered to pay $100m for cancelled flights

A court has confirmed Australia's largest airline will have to pay $100 million in fines for selling tickets to flights it had already decided to cancel, and for taking too long to tell ticket holders it wouldn't be running the services. The Federal Court ruling comes after Qantas agreed to provide $20 million in compensation to tens of thousands of customers affected by the scandal.

The $100 million fine was proposed to the court by the ACCC and Qantas in May 2024, with both agreeing the amount would be an appropriate deterrent to Qantas and other businesses from breaking consumer law in the future.

"This is a substantial penalty, which sets a strong signal to all businesses, big or small, that they will face serious consequences if they mislead their customers," says ACCC chair Gina Cass-Gottlieb, welcoming the court's decision.

In August 2023, the regulator took Qantas to court, alleging its sale of the tickets and failure to quickly inform customers once the flights had been cancelled was misleading. In May 2024, Qantas admitted it had misled consumers and committed to compensating those affected.

LIAM KENNEDY

More competition coming to nation's busiest airport

The federal government says it will reform how take-off and landing slots are allocated and used at Sydney Airport, in order to boost competition at Australia's busiest air travel hub. The government says airlines could face penalties for not using a slot, applying for allocations they're unlikely to use, and failing to return or transfer unused slots. The changes, which were recommended by a 2021 review, will also give governments the power to compel carriers to produce information on how they use their slots and give regional and new airlines better access to Sydney Airport.

Introducing the legislation to parliament, the government said it will help make the major transit hub more "efficient, resilient and competitive".

The reforms come after the ACCC in 2023 said a lack of competition in Australia's domestic aviation sector was leading to higher airfares and poorer service for consumers. The commission argued that reforming how slots are allocated at Sydney Airport would be "critical" in helping new and expanding airlines, and "the best way to promote competition".

LIAM KENNEDY

CHOICE welcomes new Aviation Industry Ombuds scheme

In August, the government committed to establishing a new independent Aviation Ombuds Scheme. It will replace the industry-funded Airline Consumer Advocate, which we awarded a Shonky in 2021 for doing little more than forwarding complaints to airlines.

The new ombuds scheme will provide travellers with an avenue to seek compensation for cancelled and unreasonably delayed flights. CHOICE has long called for a scheme like this and welcomes plans to help handle consumer complaints, enforce consumer rights, and drive improvements in airline and airport practices.

CHOICE has written a submission to the government, recommending that the scheme is designed to be:

- **independent:** governed by a board with an equal number of consumer and industry directors and an independent chair
- **effective:** established based on all the standards set by the Treasury's Benchmarks for Industry-based Customer Dispute Resolution
- **comprehensive:** all airlines should be members
- **fair:** decisions are made based on the law, good industry practice and fairness in the circumstances
- **accessible:** the scheme should be free to all consumers and accessible for people living with disabilities
- **transparent:** the scheme should be empowered to collect and publish information from the industry as it sees fit.

Thousands of CHOICE supporters and members supported the call for fairer travel rights, and this change would not have been possible without your support. Thank you!

BEA SHERWOOD

New entry requirements for your holiday in Europe

ETIAS
European Travel Information and Authorisation System

Currently, Australians can enter Europe just using their passport, but a new system will soon require a visa before arriving.

The European Travel Information and Authorisation System (Etias) is similar to the US Esta. An Etias will be required for entry to the European Schengen Area, which includes the majority of European countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. The only European Union countries not in the Schengen Area are the UK, Ireland and Cyprus.

The Etias will cost about $11.50 (7 Euro) and will be valid for three years or until your passport expires, whichever comes first. It will be available online and through the Etias mobile app, and is expected to start in mid-2025.

European countries are also introducing a digital border system called the European Entry/Exit Scheme (EES). The EES applies to non-EU visitors travelling into the Schengen Area. You'll have your fingerprints and photo taken, which creates a digital record that registers your biometric details.

Etias is yet to start, but the European Border and Coast Guard Agency has already identified 100 fake Etias websites that charge huge service fees.

For more information see smartraveller.gov.au and travel-europe.europa.eu/etias_en.

UTA MIHM

IMAGES: GETTY

New help for scam victims as bank ordered to compensate

The federal government is providing $14.7 million to the Australian Financial Complaints Authority (AFCA) to establish a single pathway for victims of common scams to seek compensation.

The government had previously announced that AFCA would manage the external dispute resolution scheme, which will assist consumers who have fallen victim to scams involving banks, telcos and digital platforms under the new Scams Prevention Framework.

The funding was announced just as AFCA ordered HSBC to reimburse a customer who fell victim to an impersonation scam in a publicised case.

The SMS- and phone-based scam received media attention after multiple victims suffered significant losses. This particular customer sought support from AFCA when he lost more than $47,000, after sharing sensitive passcodes with a scammer he believed was working for HSBC.

AFCA rejected the bank's arguments that the customer was liable, and ordered HSBC to compensate the customer for the lost money, in addition to other costs.

LIAM KENNEDY

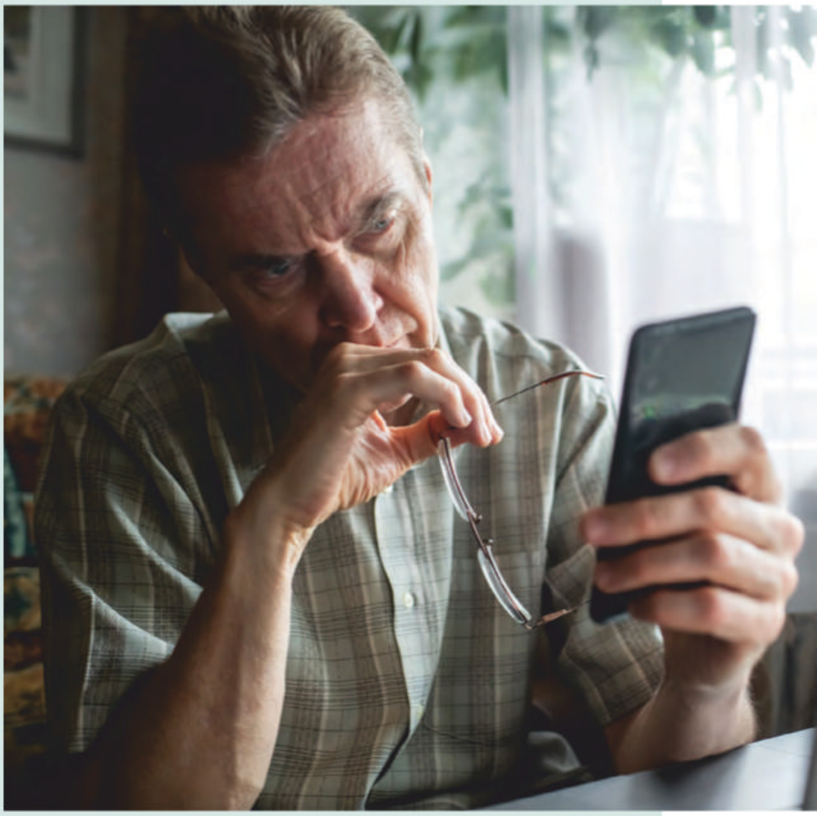
Criminals impersonating charities offering scam loans

The National Anti-Scam Centre has issued a warning to financially vulnerable Australians that criminals are impersonating charities and offering fake financial assistance schemes.

Legitimate charities such as Good Shepherd and The Salvation Army offer loans through the No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS) to support low-income earners with unexpected payments and expenses. But criminals posing as charities are offering similar schemes, as well as fake emergency relief and rental assistance, in order to steal money.

"As the cost of living has risen, struggling Australians are being targeted in despicable ways by criminals. We are warning people who need financial assistance and those that provide it to be aware of these scams," says ACCC deputy chair Catriona Lowe. "Impersonating trusted organisations is a common scam tactic. Australians should independently check an organisation offering financial assistance is legitimate, and never provide personal identifying information through social media."

JARNI BLAKKARLY



FIRST LOOK

DYSON ONTRAC HEADPHONES

PRICE $799
CONTACT dyson.com.au
★★★½☆

Head-turning headphones

Back in 2023, Dyson gave us the rather unique Zone Absolute+ air purifying headphones. The detachable air filter seemed like a bit of a novelty, but the headphones sounded fine. It turns out that wasn't the end of Dyson's audio ambitions, because the new OnTrac over-ear headphones are staking a serious claim.

With their vibrant, industrial-chic style, you can hardly accuse Dyson of taking a subtle design approach. The big, bold look works well, even if it's a tad garish for some. You can swap out the external plates and ear cushions (an additional $79 apiece) if you prefer a different look.

In a rather clever move, Dyson has built batteries into the headband, leaving enough space for a whopping 55-hours of battery life with active noise-cancellation (ANC) turned on. That'll cover just about any long-haul flight in both directions.

They're robust, snug and comfortable to wear, and only feel a bit weighty, despite the size. That said, they can slip a bit when leaning forward, as you might while gardening, for example.

Onboard controls include touch commands and a physical joystick, covering the basics like play, pause, volume, skip songs and adjusting ANC. They also support Bluetooth and wired (USB-C) connectivity and have a built-in microphone for phone calls and online meetings.

But while the OnTracs stand out in terms of style, sound quality is a little more conservative. That's not to say they sound bad – they're actually quite good. Very good, in fact. But they don't quite deliver the emotional heft that really gets the blood pumping.

Technically, they're very impressive. Audio is clear, crisp and balanced with enough stereo separation and breathing room to let every element of the mix shine through. There's an overall richness as well. Bass, while suitably restrained, can still pump up the doof with ease, impact and zero distortion.

For all this prowess, however, the OnTracs are pretty flat, lacking the dynamics, excitement and personality that make a truly great pair of headphones. It's almost like nuance has been subdued to make way for detail and clarity. This even-keeled mix may have broad appeal, but Dyson is holding these headphones back from an audio experience that's emotionally expansive and completely immersive.

> **You can hardly accuse Dyson of taking a subtle design approach**

Unfortunately, this can't be resolved by tweaking bass, treble and mid-tones in the MyDyson app equaliser (EQ). Where brands like Apple offer at least 20 EQ presets, Dyson has only provided three – Enhanced, Bass Boost and Flat. This limitation just feels lazy.

Active noise-cancellation, meanwhile, is great. Full isolation mode reduces all of the consistent sounds in your surrounds (such as traffic, trains, vacuum hums) to a soft, dull sensation. Even sudden, sharp and inconsistent noises like dogs barking or the clickety clacks of a mechanical keyboard are gently softened and barely distracting. Unlike some other headphones, the OnTracs don't generate a sense of pressure on your head when full isolation is on.

At the end of the day, most consumers will expect a fairly fleshed out experience for $799, but there isn't enough going on to justify that price tag. Something closer to a $550 RRP and a broad update to the EQ settings would make these headphones a rather enticing prospect. Until then, they may struggle to find an audience.

PETER ZALUZNY

IMAGES: GETTY

Anti-scam legislation must go further to protect Australians

Scams are a scourge costing Australians billions every year. And they're only becoming more prevalent and more sophisticated.

The government's proposed Scams Protection Framework is potentially a big step towards addressing the problem, but it has some major gaps. The framework doesn't include super, despite increasing reports of scammers operating in the space.

The stakes for super scams are very high. For many Australians, super is their biggest asset after their home. So, when scammers target the retirement income people have spent decades building up, the results are devastating.

Super Consumers Australia policy manager Rebekah Sarkoezy says the government must include super funds in the new framework within a year of it becoming law.

Further, Sarkoezy says the framework needs to require financial institutions to reimburse scam victims so that there's a strong incentive to prevent, detect and disrupt scams. A recent report found that customers are currently footing 96% of the bill for banking scams.

"We need a robust anti-scams code with real consequences for funds who fail to prevent scams," says Sarkoezy. "All Australians deserve peace of mind that their fund is at the forefront of protecting them from scams."

DANIEL HERBORN

More support from telcos for family violence victims

The federal government will direct the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) to make an enforceable industry standard to better protect telco customers experiencing domestic and family violence. The government says a voluntary guideline has been unable to provide sufficient levels of consistent protection and that the Telecommunication Consumer Protection Code was also not a solution. The ACMA's industry standard will include regulated safeguards for people accessing support from their telcos.

"For too long our organisations have been hearing harrowing stories from people when their telcos have failed to provide the appropriate assistance and support when they are in very vulnerable circumstances, including circumstances of domestic and family violence," says Consumer Action Law Centre acting director of policy and campaigns Luke Lovell. "This is a step forward and will make a big difference to the lives of people, many in desperate circumstances, who call us when their telco has failed them."

Directly regulated safeguards on domestic and family violence will address the serious issues being faced by victim-survivors in accessing support from their telcos when they need it most.

JARNI BLAKKARLY

RANTS AND RAVES

In defence of dating apps

What will be the quickest way to appear cultured and sophisticated in 2025?

Recommend a longform podcast? Swear off the big supermarkets? Take an overseas holiday to somewhere cool enough that your friends have heard of it, but not so cool that they've been there already? Any of these strategies will get you on the road to looking more worldly and mature, but I would argue one action will get you there faster. Criticising dating apps. And fair enough, too, because there's a lot to be critical of.

These are the platforms that, along with many other parts of the internet, helped bring in the now-familiar malaise of anonymised harassment and abuse that has touched many of us at one time or another. In the decade they've been around, dating apps have caused emotional distress and helped criminals fleece those looking for love. In 2024, romance scammers stole over $17 million from Australians and were the second-costliest type of scam, according to the ACCC's Scamwatch.

And it's not just other users that could be taking advantage of you. In 2020, a CHOICE investigation revealed major dating platform Tinder was charging different people different prices to use its premium service, with older Australians charged the most. Tinder later claimed it had stopped this age-based pricing, but the whole story only served as more fuel on the already raging fire of dating app hatred.

There are early signs that the worst excesses of these platforms could soon begin to be reigned in

So, yes, dating apps aren't great, but surely most of us know this by now? They're the great metaphorical punching bag of our time, an easy target for people wanting to look learned in conversation. Say they're bad and you'll win approving nods and murmurs of agreement, especially from young people.

But surely these platforms have also had some positive impact on some peoples' lives? After all, they've allowed individuals with diverse interests to connect and perhaps form meaningful relationships more easily than they might have otherwise been able to.

With the extent to which they encourage people to be upfront about their intentions, they have likely helped more people confidently connect with others, navigating what can be a pretty opaque social process.

But all these points, good and bad, are old news. So what's next? Well, there are early signs that the worst excesses of these platforms could soon begin to be reigned in.

In September 2023, the federal government directed the online dating industry to develop a code of conduct to better protect Australian users from the harms many have felt. Facing the threat of direct regulation if they didn't comply, the app companies came back with their plan. The resulting voluntary code of practice was approved by the government and came into operation in October 2024.

And yes, I know a voluntary code of conduct sounds like it'll offer about as much protection as a cheap umbrella in a cyclone, but it's a step in the right direction. It could even be the first of many, taking us to a point where we're able to tame what's been a wild and disruptive industry.

We'll have no choice but to make sure it does, because despite the haters, dating apps are here to stay.

LIAM KENNEDY

IMAGES: GETTY

ASK THE EXPERTS

Got a niggling question our team can help with?

ASK US

Email your question to **asktheexperts@choice.com.au** or write to Ask the Experts, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville, NSW 2204.
You can also tap into the 'brains trust' at **www.choice.community**.

Q I recently bought a Eufy Mach cordless vacuum and mop. It came with its own cleaning solution and a warning that using any other product might cause damage to the device.

Living in Tasmania, I've found that local department stores no longer stock the Eufy cleaning solutions, so I have to order them online. I'm curious to know if this directive to use their branded solutions is a genuine concern or more of a marketing strategy. Is it safe to use another brand of floor cleaner, or even just vinegar, or would this harm the device?

A CHOICE home appliances expert Kim Gilmour: Those branded cleaning solutions can be expensive and difficult to obtain. If you'd rather not buy them, we'd suggest using plain water rather than another brand of cleaner. We've found that plain water on its own (lukewarm is best) can do the job just fine. We wouldn't recommend using another brand of cleaner or vinegar as it is possible that they could harm the machine.

While we haven't put the question to Eufy, we have in the past asked another floorcare company, Ecovacs, if its robot window cleaner could be used with any cleaning product other than the solution provided. Ecovacs indicated that water would be an adequate substitute.

Q In your review of air purifiers, there seems to be no score for filtering out mould, which is something they're designed for. I'm wondering if maybe mould is included in the volatile organic compound (VOC) score?

A CHOICE air purifier expert Chris Barnes: We test air purifiers for dust removal, smoke removal and VOCs. VOCs include chemicals such as formaldehyde, methylene chloride and acetone (we test with acetone).

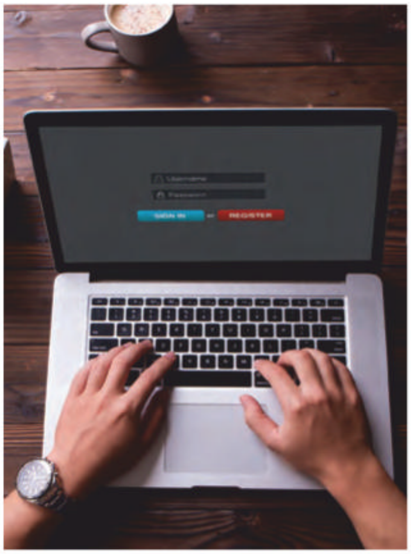
Unfortunately, our testing lab doesn't have the capacity to test with microbiological materials such as mould spores and viruses. These present a number of challenges for testing, in particular obtaining the test materials and the handling risks for testing staff.

Generally, mould spores fall into similar size ranges as particles of smoke and dust, so any model that performs well in those tests should be effective against airborne mould spores.

It's the HEPA filter in an air purifier that will help with mould. Note that these need replacing, so factor that into cost.

Q I have purchased an LG microwave oven and was wanting to register the product online. However, LG seems to force you into signing up as a member to do this. I don't want to be an LG member, I just want to register my microwave for warranty purposes. Is it legal for LG to do this?

A CHOICE investigative journalist Andy Kollmorgen: Forcing people to open online accounts in order to register their warranty is undoubtedly an unfair business practice, but under the current law it's unfortunately not illegal. It's one of the dodgy practices we've been calling out in our current campaign against unfair business practices. We are pushing for reforms that would make conduct like this illegal. You can sign the petition at **choice.com.au/MakeUnfairIllegal**.



IMAGES: GETTY | EUFY

CHOICE Help

Let's dry that again

CHOICE member Kathryn got in touch with us about a problem she was having with Siemens. The power module on her heat pump dryer had failed and she was put in touch with an authorised service dealer. But unfortunately when the technician replaced the module, it blew up immediately. Kathryn was advised that a new motor would also be required, at a cost of around $1000 for parts and labour.

The dryer cost $1700 when Kathryn had bought it six years ago, and it had been used to dry about two loads per week. She wrote to us as she believed it was not reasonable for the machine to now need such expensive repairs.

We suggested that Kathryn contact Siemens in writing and explain that the life expectancy of the heat pump dryer should be longer than six years and request that the machine be replaced or repaired free of charge under Australian Consumer Law.

Kathryn advised us that just 24 hours after sending the email, Siemens responded with a credit for the full purchase price of the heat pump dryer.

CHOICE Help is our in-house advice service for CHOICE members. We'll arm you with the information and tools you need to tackle your consumer issue and help you work towards a solution.

CONTACT US at **choice.com.au/choicehelp**.

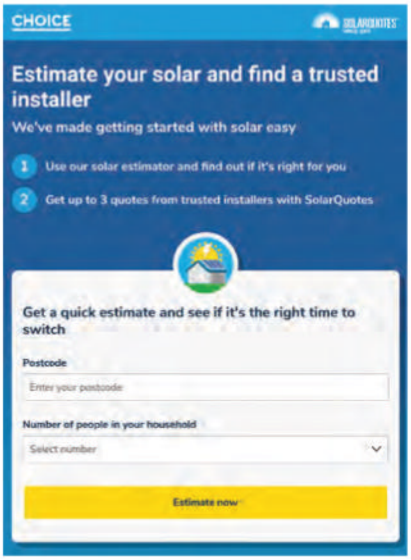
YOUR SAY

If you've had a bad experience, been ripped off or scammed, tell us and help other CHOICE members avoid the same traps. If you've had a great response to a complaint you've taken to a manufacturer or retailer, our members want to know about that too! Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

Hello sunshine

My wife and I recently started the process of looking into installing a solar battery. There are some questionable providers operating out there. One sought a deposit and then applied endless pressure. My wife and I found there was no shortage of offers with the same kind of sales pressure, and no interest in reviewing our actual needs. We cancelled our interest after only a week. Then we found Solar Quotes, who supply a lot of useful info. The three suppliers who contacted us were more interested in assessing our needs and asking questions about our electricity usage than just flogging a particular product.

Ross Pollock, Moss Vale, NSW



Estimate your solar and find a trusted installer

We've made getting started with solar easy

1. Use our solar estimator and find out if it's right for you
2. Get up to 3 quotes from trusted installers with SolarQuotes

Get a quick estimate and see if it's the right time to switch

Disclaimer: The CHOICE solar estimator tool is a partnership with Solar Quotes. Visit **choice.com.au/solar-estimator** for more information.

Five-star fake

I purchased a cordless oral water flosser from Amazon and when it arrived, was surprised to find that a coupon had been placed inside the box. I guessed it was from the importer or manufacturer. The coupon was offering a $20 Amazon gift card in exchange for a five-star review. On the back there were instructions that said I merely had to log in to my Amazon account and write a five-star review of this product, then take a screenshot of the review and send it to an email address listed on the coupon. In return they would send me a $20 gift code to spend on anything I like.

How much can you trust product reviews on Amazon when you're asked by the importer or manufacturer to give five-star reviews in exchange for gift cards?

Gary Pirie, Padstow, NSW

amazon.com.au
$20

CONTACT US!

Email us at
yoursay@choice.com.au
or write to Your Say,
CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road,
Marrickville, NSW 2204.

Broker vs bank

I have been a CHOICE subscriber for many years. I'm also a mortgage broker. I monitor my clients' interest rates to make sure they're reasonably competitive and take steps to get a better rate if feasible. I have a young client who took a fixed home loan four years ago. Knowing the fixed-rate period was expiring, I contacted her and presented her with these options:

- do nothing – just roll over to variable at her lender's "existing client" rate
- challenge them to do better, knowing that her lender's "new customer" rates were 0.5% better
- refinance to a different lender.

The difference between 'do nothing' and 'challenge' was about $2160 a year, which is why it's dubbed the 'loyalty cost' or 'lazy tax'. The difference between 'challenge' and 'refinance' was $1296 a year, but since switching lenders costs about $1300 in NSW, you can perhaps conclude that the bank is very clever in not matching their competitors.

Providing this sort of analysis and information is something that brokers can do, but banks rarely will (because it reduces their profits). There's a perception in the broking industry that banks prefer their own branch lending over dealing with brokers, and I think you can see why.

(J.T., address withheld)

DIABLO IV
VESSEL OF HATRED

👎 A few months ago, I pre-purchased a digital copy of a video game called *Diablo IV: Vessel of Hatred* so I could preload it and play it with friends on launch day. Unfortunately, due to a change of circumstance, I couldn't get time off work, so a week before launch I asked for a refund. I was refused because the pre-purchase came with a trivial 'bonus' digital cosmetic that had been instantly applied to my account (a companion dog turned into a companion cat!). Apparently, this tactic of awarding instant 'bonus' cosmetics with pre-purchases in order to prevent refunds is standard practice in the video games industry.

Andrew Stojanovski, Wollongong, NSW

IMAGES: GETTY

CHOICE SOCIAL MEDIA

Join the conversation online. We're on Facebook, Threads, Instagram and our own forum, CHOICE Community. This month: Ice dispensers, air-frying ovens and more.

Community

choice.community

Have you seen any digital scams recently?

@deb2: I received an email from Ray White Real Estate saying to be aware there is currently an email purporting to be from Ray White asking tenants to change bank details.

@jaysblueaus: I have always had a motto when someone calls, or sends a text message and/or email, I will call the proper phone number and/or log into my actual account, better to be safer and sorry.

@CharlesM: I keep getting myGov scam emails. The links are preposterous, just look at the spelling. I never click on any URLs in any messages because of how rampant it has become.

Facebook

@choiceaustralia

Is the Westinghouse oven with air fryer mode worth it?

Alison H: It's called a fan-forced oven.

David R: I have a Westinghouse wall oven with the air fryer function and it's totally useless! I get much better results with my $150 standalone air fryer.

Rick C: The nuclear model is hot… but expensive and won't be delivered until 2040.

Threads

@choiceaustralia

Does your fridge have an ice dispenser?

@sontology: No. Have heard too many horror stories.

@melbournestevo: Yes. Overrated.

@roybattypigeon: Not anymore. Fridge replaced under warranty. After much trying, the ultimate fix was to replace the door. None available. Full refund by LG just out of warranty.

Instagram

@choiceaustralia

Has your air fryer burnt your kitchen?

@ezza_saffron: Haven't had that happen to me but I have a pizza stone under mine so it doesn't melt the bench top.

@oneohohsix: At work it set off a fire alarm due to the heat it generates.

@mickymcd: Ours has managed to burn a fire safety blanket! ■

THE SUMMER ISSUE

PLAYING WITH FIRE

A CHOICE investigation found dangerous toys for sale at online retailer Temu. **Kim Gilmour** reports

Toys bought from popular online shopping platform Temu are failing Australian safety laws and have been found to carry deadly coin and button battery hazards, a CHOICE investigation reveals.

We randomly chose 15 coin and button battery-operated products from the Temu website and purchased them anonymously in May 2024. The products included children's watches, an electronic writing pad, spinning tops, mini electronic games, an LED tea light and a light-up tutu.

Our expert tester found that most had unsafe, insecure battery compartments. In fact, every product tested failed at least one requirement under the Australian button battery regulations that are designed to protect children's lives.

Although Temu has now removed the offending products, CHOICE is warning buyers to be cautious when buying toys powered by button or coin batteries online as the suppliers may be flouting Australian laws.

Key findings from our Temu safety investigation

Button battery regulations are designed to protect children's lives

A Roy Morgan survey from August 2024 found that 3.8 million Australians aged 14 or older had purchased from Temu at least once in the past 12 months, with a whopping 80% being repeat shoppers.

Temu's website and app are full of offers for "limited time deals" and "blowout sales", and enticing alerts designed to encourage impulse purchases.

NEED TO KNOW

- CHOICE tested 15 products sold by Temu, including toys and novelty items, and found that all of them contained button battery hazards, failing Australian safety requirements.
- While the specific products we tested have now been taken down, customers should remain vigilant when buying toys off the site and app.
- Temu needs to improve the way it detects and removes offending products, or it risks being fined.

The toys we bought from Temu were dirt-cheap, including a set of four mini electronic piano keyrings that cost $7.79 and a knock-off Tamagotchi pet for just $3.50. There were three types of failures across the 15 products we bought.

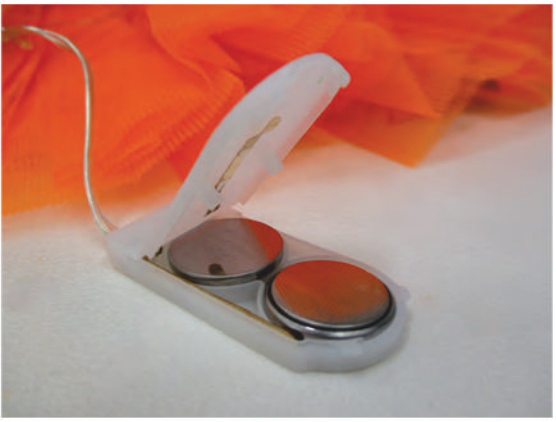
The three types of failures

1 EASILY ACCESSIBLE BUTTON BATTERIES

Seven products we bought had unsafe battery compartments that were not resistant to being opened by young children.

One of the worst offenders, a $12.79 LED tutu skirt, had an accessible lithium battery compartment that was not child-proof and could be opened without a tool, making it especially unsafe. (While the model we tested has now been removed, a quick search on Temu suggests that other, similar-looking LED skirts that use button batteries are still on sale, but it's unknown if those meet safety requirements.)

Another worrying product, a coin cell charger, had two lithium batteries supplied loose in a plastic zip bag, and the batteries could be easily removed from their holder.



2 NON-CAPTIVE SCREWS

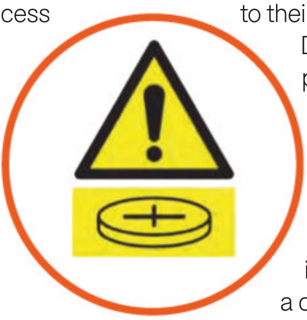
A further seven toys had non-captive screws, meaning that the screws don't remain with the battery compartment cover once it is opened.

If a screw is lost when changing the batteries, it becomes easy for a child to open the cover and access the batteries inside.

A captive screw (that is, one attached to the battery cover) is a requirement under the Australian toy safety standard, which is one of the industry standards used to prove that a product meets the button battery regulations.

3 LABELLING FAILURES

Apart from the physical failures, 14 of the 15 products did not have the required button safety alert symbol on the front of the packaging, and a number had general safety labels (such as choking hazard statements) that were so small they were virtually unreadable.



Products removed from sale, but buyer beware

Temu says it had already removed three of the dangerous products in July and August, prior to CHOICE alerting it to the failures: the LED tea lights, the writing pad and the light-up tutu.

Temu removed the remaining 12 products we tested only after we alerted them to our findings.

It says the third-parties who sell through its platform are required to submit relevant documentation and sign agreements "affirming their commitment to product safety and adherence to regulations relevant to their intended markets".

Despite this, it looks like plenty of unsafe products have the potential to slip through the net. It's a worrying set of results, given Temu's surging Australian popularity in recent months during a cost-of-living crisis. ▶

Temu removed the remaining 12 products we tested only after we alerted them to our findings

A widespread issue

This investigation follows previous CHOICE tests of button batteries bought from a range of online retailers such as eBay and Amazon, as well as 'bricks and mortar' retailers. All too many are failing the requirements that have been in place since June 2022.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

Once coin and button batteries come loose, they have the potential to be ingested, with devastating consequences including death, choking and localised internal burning. Three Australian children have died from ingesting button batteries to date.

IMAGE: GETTY

Temu hasn't signed the safety pledge

In Australia, online marketplaces including Amazon, eBay, AliExpress and catch.com.au have signed up to the ACCC's voluntary Product Safety Pledge. The Pledge commits signatories to 12 product safety related actions, including removing unsafe product listings within two days of receiving a takedown request from an Australian regulatory authority.

Three Australian children have died from button battery ingestion

To date, Temu has not signed up to the pledge. The company says it's "in regular communication with consumer groups and regulatory authorities to address inquiries and facilitate product takedowns or recalls when required".

But our spot check suggests more needs to be done to reduce the number of problematic items sold in the first place.

While Temu continues to grow and recruit sellers – and sell products that may not meet local laws – our advice is to remain vigilant about which products you buy on the site. And if you find a problem with a listing, report it to Temu and ACCC Product Safety (visit productsafety.gov.au) for further investigation.

Call for general safety provision

"It's disappointing that big companies like Temu continue to flout mandatory button battery safety requirements, putting children in Australia at risk of serious injury or even death," says Andy Kelly, deputy director of campaigns and communications at CHOICE.

"We're calling on Temu to urgently sign up to the Product Safety Pledge. We're also calling on the government to introduce a general safety provision that would make it illegal

Temu safety failures: The full results

The products we tested originated from Chinese suppliers, but were all received in one package with a return address listed in Bankstown, NSW, which corresponds to that of a third-party global freight forwarder.

The products included children's toys and novelty items. All of the listings have since been taken off the platform, but it's possible that similar items may still be available, so we advise shopping with caution.

LED TEA LIGHT (LITHIUM BATTERY)

- Battery compartment is not resistant to being opened by young children and the battery was removed without the aid of a tool. The battery became released.

TUTU SKIRT (LITHIUM BATTERY)

- Battery compartment failed the tension test and batteries became released without the use of a tool.
- Safety alert symbol is not present on the front of the packaging.

COIN CELL CHARGER (LITHIUM BATTERY)

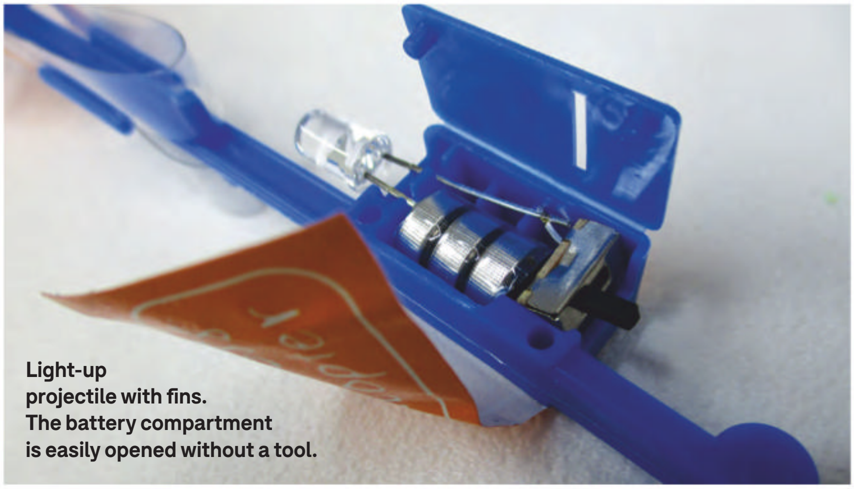
- Battery holder is not resistant to being opened by young children and the battery can be removed without the aid of a tool. The batteries became released.
- Certain warning statements about the batteries are not present.
- Safety alert symbol is not present on the front of the packaging.
- Two lithium coin batteries were supplied loose in plastic zip bags and are not designed to be child-resistant.
- The internationally recognised "keep out of reach of children" symbol is not present on the batteries.

3.6V
LIR2016
LITHIUM ION BATTERY
3.6V
LIR2016

Above: Tutu skirt.

Right: Coin cell charger with the two batteries that were supplied loose in plastic zip bags.

Square watch.



Light-up projectile with fins. The battery compartment is easily opened without a tool.

SQUARE WATCH AND ELECTRONIC PET GAME

- Screw is not captive, meaning it did not remain with the battery compartment when opened.
- Safety alert symbol is not present on the front of the packaging.
- Certain warning statements about the battery are not present.

SPINNING TOP WITH LAUNCHER

- Safety alert symbol is not present on the front of the packaging.

LIGHT-UP PROJECTILE WITH FINS

- Battery holder is not resistant to being opened by young children and the battery can be removed without the aid of a tool. The batteries became released.
- Safety alert symbol is not present on the front of the packaging.

SPACE FIGURINE BUILDING BLOCKS AND SLAP ON ANIMAL WATCH

- Battery compartment failed the tension test and batteries became released without the use of a tool.
- Certain warning statements about the battery are not present.
- Safety alert symbol is not present on the front of the packaging.

All of the listings have since been taken off the platform, but it's possible that similar items may still be available

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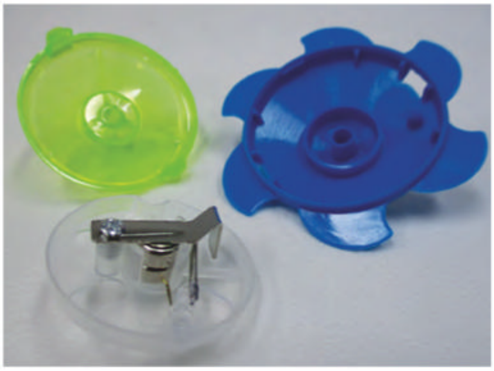
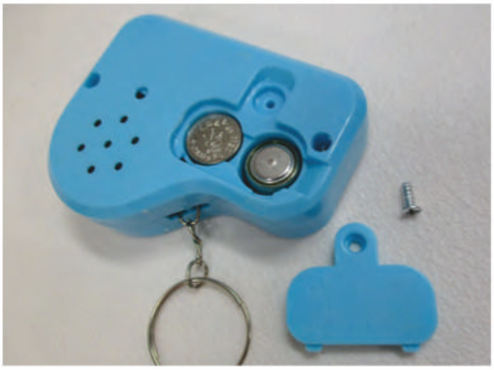
FINGER SPINNING TOP

- Upper and lower halves of the item's body were separated in the tension test and consequently, batteries became released without the use of a tool.
- Safety alert symbol is not present on the front of the packaging.

WRITING TABLET (LITHIUM BATTERY), MUSICAL KEYBOARD, CAMERA PROJECTOR, PROJECTOR WATCH AND CARTOON PROJECTOR

- Screw is not captive. When you open the battery compartment to change the battery, the screw that fastens the cover comes off completely and does not remain with the battery compartment cover. If this screw is lost then the cover could be accessed by a child.
- Safety alert symbol is not present on the front of the packaging. ▸





Left: Musical keyboard. Pictured is the non-captive screw that could be easily lost when changing the batteries.

Far left: Finger spinning top. In this picture the top and bottom halves have been separated, leaving the button batteries exposed.

to sell unsafe products in the first place, and this should apply to online marketplaces like Temu," he says.

Even though Temu says its suppliers must sign product safety commitments, the e-commerce giant still has a duty to protect its customers.

An ACCC spokesperson explains that "if a business supplies consumer products in Australia at any stage in the supply chain, they are legally responsible for product safety".

A general safety provision would make it illegal to sell unsafe products in the first place

"All businesses, including manufacturers, importers, distributors, and retailers involved in the supply chain for button batteries or products powered by them, must comply with the mandatory button battery safety and information standards," they say.

"These standards include design requirements and safety warnings and information to be provided on the product and its packaging."

ACCC TAKING SERIOUS STANCE ON NON-COMPLIANCE

Temu has attracted ACCC attention recently, with the recall of several unbranded LED headlights designed for Croc-style shoes.

Although the ACCC won't comment on specific investigations, the spokesperson says it "takes alleged non-compliance with the button battery standards very seriously and will continue to take enforcement action where necessary".

Since the laws came into effect, several brands including Tesla and The Reject Shop have been fined for failing to comply with mandatory safety and information standards for products powered by button batteries.

Safety advice on button batteries

The ACCC gives the following advice about button batteries:

- If you suspect a child has swallowed or inserted a button battery contact the 24/7 Poison Information Centre on 13 11 26, and Triple Zero (000) immediately if your child is having any difficulty breathing.
- Check for a secure compartment and warning labels, even when shopping with a trusted seller. If you need to buy a product with a button battery online, check the compartment is secure when it is delivered.
- Regularly check that products and toys are not damaged or broken, or if the button battery compartment does not close securely. If faulty, stop using the product and keep it away from children.
- If you need to dispose of button batteries, put sticky tape around both sides, safely put them in a child-resistant container and recycle them at your nearest drop-off point. Australia has a national battery recycling program. Visit bcycle.com.au/drop-off to find a location.
- Consumers can report an unsafe product to the ACCC at productsafety.gov.au.

How Temu monitors unsafe products

In response to our findings, Temu tells CHOICE it conducts spot checks on physical products to see if they meet relevant standards, and uses customer feedback to identify potential issues with products.

"Accountability and penalties are clearly defined within Temu's quality control framework. We continually guide sellers on the need for strict product safety compliance, ensuring they are fully aware of their responsibilities," a spokesperson tells us.

"Violations can lead to warnings, penalties, product delisting [and] account closure, and Temu maintains a blocklist to prevent problematic sellers from re-entering the platform." ■

THE SUMMER ISSUE

The ins and outs of upsizing

Is it worth bulk buying groceries from stores like Costco or Amazon? **Pru Engel** unpacks the results of our price comparison

With the holiday season upon us and all the eating and entertaining that it brings with it, you may be contemplating the benefits of supersizing your regular grocery list, and seeking out some bargain bulk buys.

Not only will buying in bulk save you money, you think to yourself, but it will cut down on multiple trips to the store over the coming weeks to replenish supplies. Even better if you can avoid the supermarkets altogether and buy in bulk from online retailers.

Certain product categories and retailers may offer better value than others when shopping in bulk

Bulk buying is certainly a strategy that could help you save on your grocery bill. But it's not always the case that buying bigger is better.

Is buying in bulk cheaper?

At CHOICE, we've long said that comparing unit prices between similar products is one of the easiest ways to ensure you're getting the best deal possible.

If you're looking at shelf prices instore, the larger jar of Vegemite is likely (although not guaranteed) to be cheaper per gram than the smaller jar.

But is it always a good idea to upsize? And can buying products in large multipacks save you even more cash? Before you add that kilo bucket of M&Ms to your cart, we have some advice.

We analysed prices for 100 packaged products from national retailers Costco, Amazon, Officeworks and Catch (all of which often offer either larger pack sizes or multipacks) and compared them to prices for the same or comparable products from Coles and Woolies.

We found that there are definitely deals to be had, and certain product categories and retailers may offer better value than others when shopping in bulk. But you still need to keep an eye on unit prices. ▸

In our price comparison, we found you could make savings of up to 62% when buying cleaning products in bulk from Amazon, for example, compared to buying the same products at Coles or Woolies.

But in other cases, you could find yourself paying more than twice as much to buy bulk muesli bars than you would to buy the regular pack sizes in the major supermarkets.

The best and worst bulk buy deals

Of the 100 products we compared between the bulk shops (Amazon, Officeworks, Catch and Costco) and the major supermarkets (Coles and Woolies), we found it was cheaper to buy the bulk option from the non-supermarket retailer 67% of the time. The discounts we found ranged from as little as 3% all the way up to 62%.

BEST DEALS The products we found to have the biggest discounts were cleaning products along with health, beauty or personal care products, such as body wash and baby wipes.

This finding tracks with our recent survey of more than 200 CHOICE Community members, who told us they're most likely to look beyond the major supermarkets when shopping for these types of products.

You're in luck if you're a clean freak who loves a bargain. In our sample, we found lots of good deals on bulk cleaning products on Amazon. Some examples included a 5L pack of Windex Glass that was 62% cheaper than buying the standard 500ml bottle from Coles, and a 3kg pack of Vanish Napisan Oxi Action Gold Multi-Power Laundry Booster Powder that was 59% cheaper than its standard supermarket counterpart.

BULK BUY BUSTS It's not all great news though. In our sample of prices, we found some bulk products that cost significantly more than their standard supermarket counterparts.

For example, in confectionery, 1.3kg bulk bags of Allen's Red Frogs and Allen's Party Mix at Officeworks were 15% and 10% more expensive than their respective prices at Woolies and Coles. And the 100-pack of Chupa Chups at Officeworks will cost you 45 cents per Chupa Chup, but you can pick up a 25-pack of Chupa Chups at Woolworths for just 25 cents per Chupa Chup.

Amazon sells Tim Tams in a 2kg bulk pack that works out to be 1.5 times as much per 100g than if you'd simply bought a standard pack from Woolies.

The discounts we found buying in bulk ranged from as little as 3% all the way up to 62%

Using unit pricing

When shopping for groceries at a supermarket, you can see prices for each product on the shelf label (instore) or below the product image (online). Look closer and you'll also see a 'unit price'. This gives the price of the product based on a standard unit of measurement.

For example, a 2kg packet of rice may be $4.80, but its unit price will be listed in smaller writing on the label as 24c per 100g. The unit price lets you compare the price of the product like for like, with different brands or other products, to find out which is the cheapest option.

You might find another brand of rice that seems cheaper at $3 for 1kg, but look at the unit price (30c per 100g) and it's a quick, simple way to see that the 2kg packet is the cheaper option.

It can be tricky to compare prices at non-supermarket retailers, as they don't always display the unit price so you have to work it out yourself.

Exploring retailers and deals beyond the major supermarkets can still be a good way to save money

Is a Costco membership worth it?

When we did a broader survey of Costco prices in June 2024, we found that of the 23 bulk items we spot-checked against similar items at Coles and Woolworths, Costco had the cheapest unit price 19 times. But to shop at Costco you have to travel to one of the 15 stores across Australia and pay an annual membership fee of $65, which isn't as convenient as clicking to buy with home delivery from Catch or Amazon.

COSTCO
WHOLESALE
GOLD STAR MEMBER

on your shop. But if you're adding that 2kg batch of Tim Tams to your cart (no judgement), get your calculator out first.

And if you're buying in bulk from the online retailers, you'll also have to factor in the delivery fee, which, at the time of writing, starts from $7.95 for standard shipping at Catch and from $7.99 for standard delivery to metro areas at Amazon.

Things to consider before bulk buying

While it can be great for people with large families, those who love entertaining, or households with lots of storage space, buying in bulk isn't the best option for everyone, even if it is cheaper. Here are some things to consider other than price.

1. STORAGE SPACE

We don't all have a spare garage, shed or lots of space available in the cupboard. Don't make the mistake of buying 64 rolls of toilet paper just because it's cheaper and then having nowhere to stash it.

2. USE-BY DATES

While some products are fine to eat beyond their best-before dates, be wary of buying products in bulk that won't keep well. And store items correctly: if you're buying large quantities of rice or flour, for example, make sure they're stored in well-sealed containers in a cool, dry place.

3. OVER-BUYING

It's not a good deal if you buy bulk quantities of, say, packaged snacks, and they sit uneaten for months. Got kids who are obsessed with a certain cracker one day, then avoid it like the plague the next? We hope you didn't stock up.

4. OVER-EXCITEMENT

How good is your self-restraint? Buying a jar of Nutella as big as your head or a multipack of Tim Tams becomes a less economical choice if you're going to scoff it all in one sitting. ■

IMAGE: GETTY

100 products compared from bulk shops

amazon | officeworks | catch | Costco Wholesale | coles | Woolworths

Cheaper to buy the bulk option from the non-supermarket retailer 67% of the time.

Discounts ranged from as little as 3% all the way up to 62%.

Bulk buy bargain

5L pack of Windex Glass from Amazon was 62% cheaper per mL than the standard 500mL bottle from Coles.

VALUE REFILL
Windex
STREAK-FREE SHINE!
ORIGINAL

62% cheaper per mL from amazon

1.5 times more expensive per 100g from amazon

Bulk buy bust

2kg pack of Tim Tams from Amazon was 1.5 times more expensive per 100g than the standard pack from Woolies.

1KG FAMILY PACK
nutella
FERRERO
HAZELNUT SPREAD WITH COCOA
1kg NET

Buying a jar of Nutella as big as your head becomes less economical if you're going to scoff it all in one sitting

Refund rights

We're legally entitled to a remedy if a product fails, but as **Liam Kennedy** explains, the reality isn't that simple

New CHOICE data shows Australians are struggling to get refunds and replacements from retailers for faulty and dangerous products, even though the law says such remedies are guaranteed.

Consumers have reported businesses being dismissive of their concerns, telling them to do their own repairs and even trying to remove negative reviews after products fail. This is despite the Australian Consumer Law (ACL), which has been in place since 2011, requiring that retailers give customers a refund or replacement if they've sold them a product with a major fault.

> **Consumers have reported businesses being dismissive of their concerns**

The issues were laid bare in a survey of CHOICE members and supporters, which

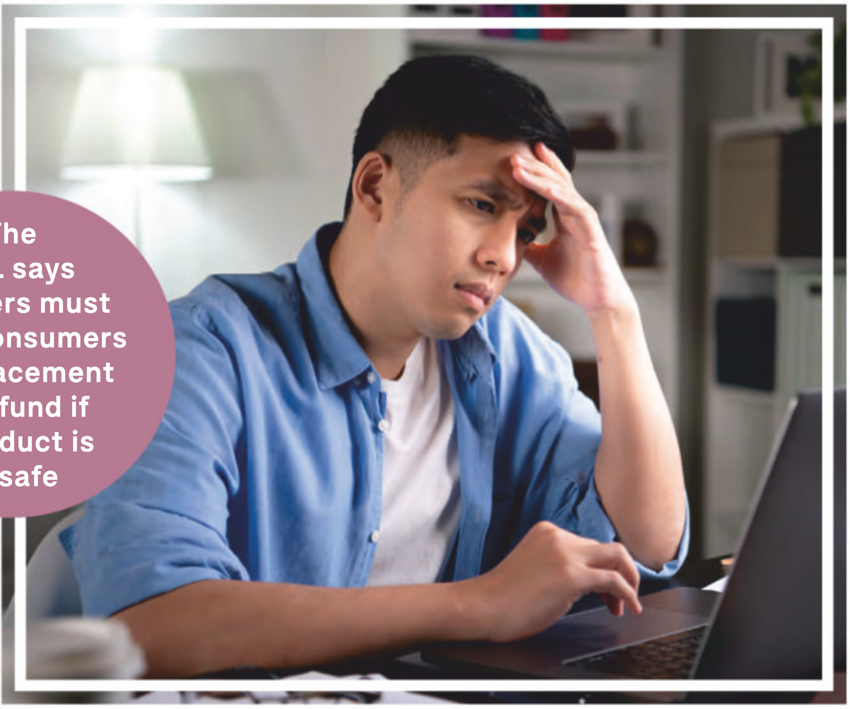
NEED TO KNOW

- Australians are struggling to get refunds and replacements for dangerous and faulty products.
- This is despite the introduction of laws over a decade ago that guarantee our rights when goods fail.
- People say retailers are being evasive, telling them to repair products themselves and trying to hide negative feedback from other customers.

found only 24% feel confident reporting an unsafe product.

We surveyed more than 6000 people in July 2024. When asked about their experiences over the past five years, 39% said there had been at least one instance where they hadn't bothered reporting a dangerous product they'd encountered, and over 40% didn't attempt to return an unsafe product.

Of those who did try to take a risky product back to where they had bought it from, 24% encountered an issue.



The ACL says retailers must offer consumers a replacement or refund if a product is unsafe

IMAGE: GETTY

Retailers shirking responsibility

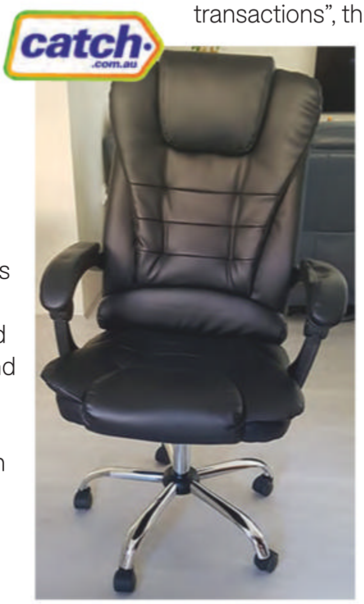
CHOICE member Tony Preston tells us he endured a fruitless weeks-long battle with online retailer Catch and one of its suppliers over an office chair he bought from the site.

He says issues began appearing with the chair as soon as he had finished assembling it.

"It just didn't support me. It started to go sideways and the chair itself had a lean," he recalls.

"When the gas strut [that lifts and lowers the chair] collapsed, I thought this is ridiculous. It's actually getting dangerous now, because someone could tumble out and hurt themselves."

The ACL says retailers must offer consumers a replacement or refund if a product is unsafe and shouldn't direct them to contact the item's manufacturer. But when Tony contacted Catch, he was told the chair's supplier would respond to his complaint.



LEGAL GREY AREAS

Catch Marketplace, where the chair Tony bought is listed, is a section of Catch's website that the company describes as a "curated marketplace" for "third-party sellers".

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), the consumer regulator, acknowledged in 2022 that because the ACL was designed to govern "traditional transactions", there's a "lack of clarity" as to how it applies to more modern online marketplaces like Catch.

Tony has little time for this ambiguity, believing Catch should have taken greater care of his concerns. He says the company's referral gave him the impression that they were "avoiding responsibility". Catch did not respond to a request for comment.

Consumers left frustrated

Sydney resident Jenetta Haim claims she was also brushed off by a major retailer after she was left reeling when a kettle she'd bought malfunctioned.

"One time, I turned it on ... and it just flashed in my face. It was an explosive type of flash," she says.

Feeling lucky to not have been injured, Jenetta tried to return the item, but she says the shop staff she spoke to were dismissive of her concerns and requests for a remedy.

"They sort of said: that's not our problem. They didn't say those exact words, but that was the message they were trying to get through," she says. "Why would you buy anything off anybody if they're going to treat you like that?"

Disputes lasting weeks

While Jenetta eventually got a refund for her kettle, other consumers have no such luck. Following his unsatisfactory communications with Catch, Tony became embroiled in an email exchange with his office chair's supplier, Aussie Union Group. ▶

The back and forth lasted for weeks as he repeatedly requested his money back, but was asked to fix the chair himself with new parts supplied by Aussie Union.

"They just wouldn't consider a refund or me sending the chair back at their expense," Tony recalls. "They completely ignored my requests and said: 'send a photo [of the chair] and we'll replace the broken parts'."

Despite being experienced at putting together office equipment, Tony says the poor quality of the replacement components he received meant the issues with the chair "went on and on" before he eventually gave up.

"After a while, you swallow your pride and just move on, put it in the bin and give them a bad review, which is what I did."

> **"After a while, you swallow your pride and just move on"**

THE SUMMER ISSUE

Returning gifts or sales items

With Christmas and the Boxing Day sales period in full force, you might be wondering about your rights when it comes to returning gifts or sales items.

UNWANTED GIFTS

Change of mind purchases (including clothing items that are the wrong size) aren't covered under the ACL. However, many retailers have generous and extended return policies around Christmas. If you've received a present that you're not particularly fond of, or have changed your mind about a purchase, it's worth asking the store what they can do.

SALE GOODS

If you buy an item in the sales, your regular consumer rights apply. Signs that say things like 'no refunds', 'no refunds on sale items', or 'exchange or credit note only for return of sale items' are illegal. If you have a problem with an item you've bought in the sales, take it back to the seller. Remember that retailers can't just fob you off to the manufacturer – they're obliged to help resolve your issue.

A product does not need to be in its original packaging if you're returning it because it's faulty or not fit for purpose, but a business is entitled to ask for some form of proof of purchase. If you've lost your receipt, you can use the following as proof of purchase:

- a credit or debit card statement
- a confirmation or receipt number from a phone or internet transaction
- a warranty card showing the date, price and place of purchase
- the serial or production number if it's stored on the retailer's computer.

If you believe you're entitled to a refund, replacement or repair, but the retailer won't provide one, contact your local state or territory consumer affairs or fair trading agency.

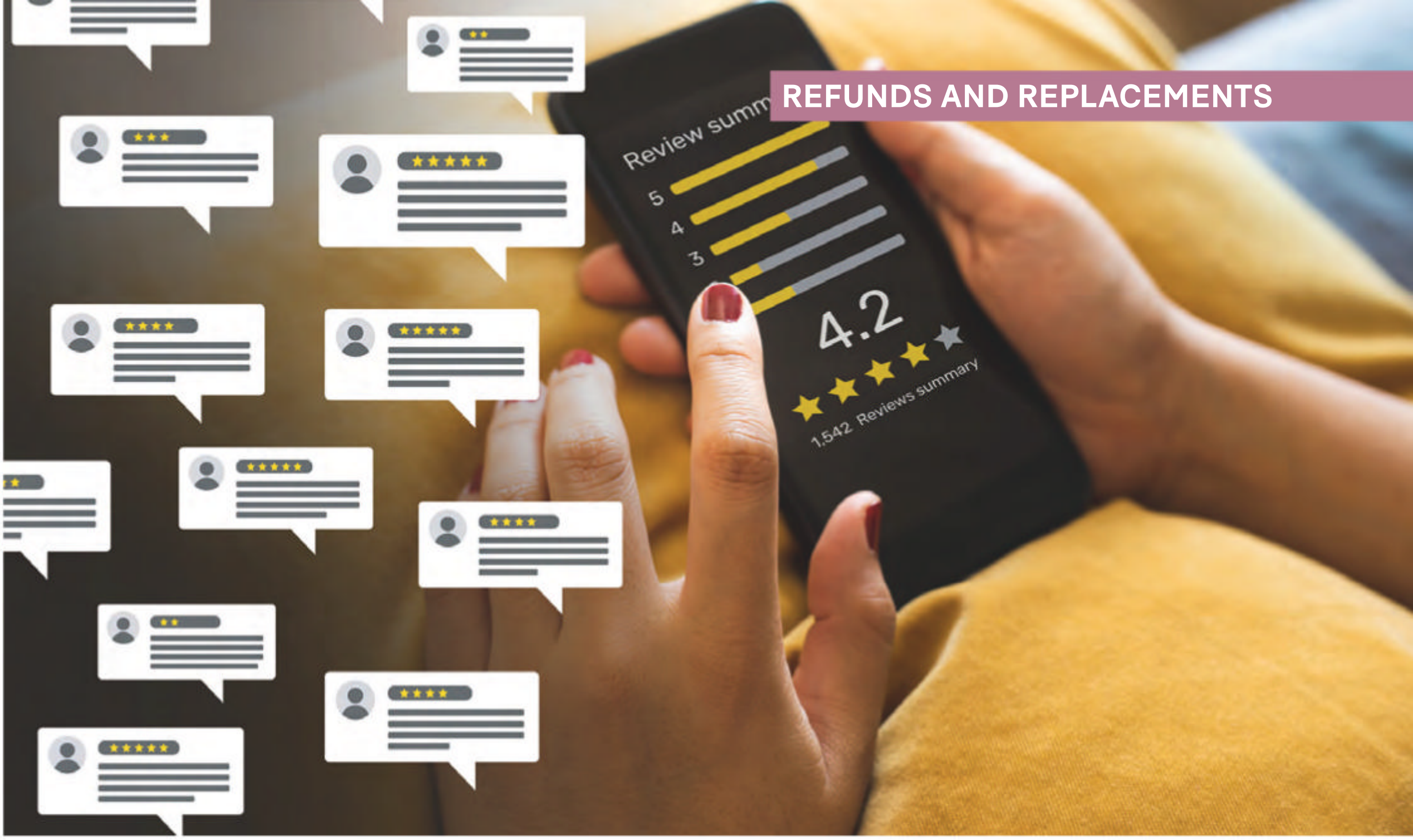


IMAGE: GETTY

Negative reviews disappearing

Unfortunately, the negative feedback Tony left on Catch only reignited the fruitless back and forth.

“[Aussie Union] wrote back to me saying: ‘can [you] take the review down and send a few photographs?’ I basically did what they’ve done to me – I just ignored them.”

The review is no longer visible, even though Tony says he never agreed to its removal.

CHOICE deputy director of campaigns Andy Kelly says it’s a concerning development.

“Consumers often rely on customer reviews, which can identify concerning near-misses. Businesses shouldn’t be seeking to censor any legitimate customer reviews,” he says.

Aussie Union Group and Catch didn’t respond to CHOICE requests for comment.

Delays posing serious risks

Kelly is alarmed by the trend borne out in our survey of consumers being reluctant to come forward with faulty products, and says many safety issues could be flying under the radar.”

“Too many people are being given the runaround when it comes to trying to return unsafe goods. When it comes to the safety of products in our homes, this just isn’t good enough.”

CHOICE is calling on the government to introduce a general safety provision in the ACL, similar to those already in force in jurisdictions like the European Union.

Australia has a system in place to recall dangerous goods, but Kelly says a general safety provision “would create a legal duty for retailers and suppliers to ensure their products are safe before they’re sold”.

> “Too many people are being given the runaround when it comes to trying to return unsafe goods”

And regarding Tony’s Catch dispute, Kelly says the provision “should also require online marketplaces to ensure the products sold on their platforms are safe”.

What to do with an unsafe or faulty product

“If you discover that a product is unsafe or faulty, you should contact the place of purchase immediately, outline the problem and request a remedy,” Kelly explains.

If the item has a major problem, the ACL says the customer has the choice of a refund or replacement.

A problem is major if it means you can’t use the item, repairs can’t be made quickly, the product is unsafe, or if you wouldn’t have bought the item if you had known about the problem.

Only one of these needs to apply to meet the benchmark of a major failure.

If a product has a minor problem, the retailer is only obliged to repair it for free and doesn’t have to offer you a refund or replacement.

Businesses can ask you for some form of proof of purchase, such as a receipt or bank statement, but the item doesn’t need to be in original packaging for a return.

It’s worth noting that these consumer rights don’t apply when you’re buying privately, such as through Facebook Marketplace or at a garage sale. ■

THE SUMMER ISSUE

Pump it

Looking to save money on fuel? **Liam Kennedy** shares some tips

The cost of filling up our cars is driving a lot of financial stress. In our January 2024 Consumer Pulse survey of Australians, 81% of households said they were concerned about the cost of fuel.

Bowser prices are often well out of our control, dictated by global cartels, fluctuations in the exchange rate and opaque retail strategies, among other factors.

But there are ways you can make significant savings on fuel. Here are our key tips for paying less at the pump.

1 Think about how you drive

Are you guilty of being a little heavy-footed on the accelerator? Easing back on the pedal is just one of a range of practices you can adopt to save on fuel.

"Changing your driving style is one of the most effective ways to improve your car's fuel economy," says Alex Forrest, vehicles and fuels manager at Western Australia's Royal Automobile Club (RAC).

"Think of the accelerator as a tap – the more you press it down, the more fuel you'll send to the engine to be burnt."

> "Changing your driving style is one of the most effective ways to improve your car's fuel economy"

NEED TO KNOW

- Fuel costs can change suddenly, but there are ways you can spend less when prices are high.
- Making changes to how you drive and the way you use and care for your car can help you pay less at the pump.
- It pays to shop around for good deals, keep an eye on price cycles and even consider a more efficient vehicle.

“Relax a bit as you drive,” advises Dr Ian Jeffreys, principal economic and affordability specialist at the Royal Automobile Club of Queensland (RACQ). “Smooth out the drive [and] drive steadily, avoiding any harsh acceleration or hard braking.”

It also pays to avoid driving at times when traffic is congested. The NRMA says a car idling in traffic typically uses 1–2 litres of fuel per hour, depending on its size and engine type. It therefore follows that once you’ve reached your destination, it’s a good idea to shut the engine off, even if you’re only stopping for a short time.

“Modern cars don’t need to be ‘warmed up’, it just wastes fuel,” says James Williams, head of policy at the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV).

“By having the engine switched off, even for a short period, you will save more fuel than is lost in restarting the engine and the increased wear and tear from this is negligible.”

Running a car’s air con causes it to work harder and use more fuel

There’s also a careful (but beneficial) balance you can strike between running the air conditioning and rolling down windows. Running a car’s air con causes it to work harder and use more fuel, so if you want to cool off, it’s usually better to crack a window instead.

But this does depend on how fast you’re going. When a car is travelling at 80km/h or more, the aerodynamic drag caused by an open window will cause more stress on the engine, meaning less juice in the tank.

DO MANUAL CARS USE LESS FUEL?

When we asked CHOICE members for tips to save money on fuel, some recommended driving a manual car, suggesting automatic cars were less economical.

“This is true of older vehicles, such as those from the 1980s, 90s and early 2000s, which had automatic transmissions that sapped more of the engine’s power,” says the RAC’s Alex Forrest. “The availability [now] of more advanced auto transmission designs, such as dual clutch and continuously variable transmissions, have helped automatic vehicles become much more efficient.”

Ian Jeffreys, from the RACQ, agrees that manual cars don’t automatically take the title of the most economical vehicles, but argues it can be easier to drive more efficiently with your hand on the gear stick.

“In a manual car, it’s very clear which gear you’re in and you are in control,” he says. “You want to be getting into as high a gear as possible [to save fuel].”

IMAGE: GETTY

2 Care for your car

On top of general maintenance, there are several specific tips that can pay dividends at the bowser.

One is to unload unnecessary items from your car. The NRMA found loading a vehicle to its maximum-rated weight will lead to it using 24% more fuel.

“If you’re a golfer or scuba diver, get your gear out of the boot [and] put it in the garage,” advises Peter Khoury, a spokesperson for the NSW-based motorist group.

The NRMA also found keeping your car’s tyres inflated at the right pressure will reduce rolling resistance and fuel consumption by around 2%. The recommended tyre pressure for your car is usually written on the driver’s door jamb or in your owner’s manual.

Jeffreys says removing any car add-ons when you don’t need them will also reduce resistance.

“If you don’t need the roof racks, take them off,” he advises. “[These sorts] of things will increase drag and increase your fuel use.”

3 Pay attention to prices via apps and websites

Browsing your local bowsers before you fill up can recoup savings, as prices can vary hugely even between outlets in the same area. ▶

"There's nothing worse than getting in the car, driving to your local servo, filling up and then going around the corner and sometimes the price differences can be as much as 30 or 40 cents a litre," says Peter Khoury.

We compared two retailers on the same day and just a five-minute drive apart, and found a difference of 52 cents a litre in the cost of unleaded 91 petrol. Luckily, smartphone apps allow you to do your own comparisons and save you having to drive around the neighbourhood looking for the cheapest deal. According to a 2022 survey by a petrol and convenience store industry group, a third of consumers are now using these fuel comparison apps.

CHOICE tip: Prices at independent service stations tend to be cheaper than those at major chains.

FUEL COMPARISON TOOLS

Most of Australia is covered by an app or website that will let you filter by fuel type and compare prices near you.

In most states and territories, these services draw their prices from a government database that retailers are required to report to. We've found these services to be the most accurate.

Some states and territories with databases also have their own government-run apps or websites. Others have a list of third-party apps or websites that receive data from their respective fuel reporting schemes.

Other services use information that is community-sourced, meaning you're relying on other motorists to update prices. These have traditionally dominated in Victoria and the ACT, because neither jurisdiction has a government-run fuel price database that apps and websites can draw from. But NSW's FuelCheck app has recently expanded into the ACT and is now displaying prices reported to it by local service stations.

How to compare fuel prices in each state and territory

NSW: Has a government-run database and app and website. Third-party services are also available.

ACT: Most service stations are included on NSW's FuelCheck app and website, but third-party services are also available.

Tas: Has a government-run database and app and website. Third-party services are also available.

WA: Has a government-run database and website. Third-party services are also available.

NT: Has a government-run database and website. Third-party services are also available.

Qld: Has a government-run database and a list of third-party apps and websites that receive and display this data.

SA: Has a government-run database and a list of third-party apps and websites that receive and display this data.

Vic: No government-run database, but third-party services are available.

For an overview of the services available in most states and territories and information on which are the most reliable and easy to use, visit **choice.com.au/fuelapps**.

Most of Australia is covered by an app or website that will let you compare prices near you

4 Get to know your city's petrol price cycle

If your car uses petrol, it's handy to know that prices go up and down in a relatively predictable pattern in Australia's largest cities: Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth. Similar sequences have also been observed in some neighbouring regional areas.

This is the 'petrol price cycle' (diesel prices don't move in this way) and it can make a big difference to how much you pay at the pump. "It can either help you save money on fuel or leave you absolutely exposed if you fill up at the wrong point of the cycle," explains Peter Khoury, NRMA.

If you live in a city with a petrol price cycle, you can save by filling up towards the end of the cheap (or lower) part of the cycle. Ian Jeffreys says this is the time to be comparing local prices.

"It's in the cheap phase, moving into the price hike phase, where the best deals can be found," the RACQ spokesperson says. "You really want to be watching the cycle in your city and making sure that when you're moving into the price hike phase, you've got a full tank of fuel."

If you're in one of the five largest capitals, you can see what part of the cycle your city is in by checking the ACCC's petrol price cycle page (go to accc.gov.au and search 'petrol price cycle'). The consumer regulator updates this resource three times a week, telling you where your city's cycle is up to and providing buying advice. Some fuel price apps can also be configured to alert you when it's a good time to buy in your area.

PRICE CYCLES EXPLAINED

These fluctuations in petrol prices don't mirror changes in wholesale costs, but are driven by retailer strategies in bigger cities. Retailers seem to adopt these practices in districts where they're competing against lots of other service stations and want to get a competitive edge.

In these areas, the price you pay at the bowser at the bottom of the cycle tends to be close to the wholesale price and, according to a 2018 ACCC study, can even be below the average costs borne by the retailers to supply the petrol.

This means the price cycle can deliver good deals to consumers buying at the right time, especially compared to regional areas, where petrol prices are usually higher and more heavily influenced by international factors. But it also means retailers' margins get squeezed, so they'll raise the price after a period of time.

This increase happens more slowly in the areas with the most retailers, where businesses are cautious about raising prices too quickly and being undercut by others. Prices will rise to a certain point, until some retailers start cutting them again to gain an edge on the competition and attract more customers.

Desire to compete leads other retailers to follow suit, until the bowser prices fall back closer to the wholesale rate (back to the beginning of the cycle), where they will stay until retailers start looking for higher margins again.

It usually takes around five weeks for prices in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane to go from their low point to a high and back again. The Adelaide petrol price cycle is about two weeks, and Perth's is about one week.

Petrol prices go up and down in a relatively predictable pattern in Australia's largest cities

5 Consider a more efficient vehicle

Switching to a vehicle with better fuel economy is an obvious way to spend less on refills, but going all the way to an electric or hybrid car can cut down on these costs substantially, if not completely.

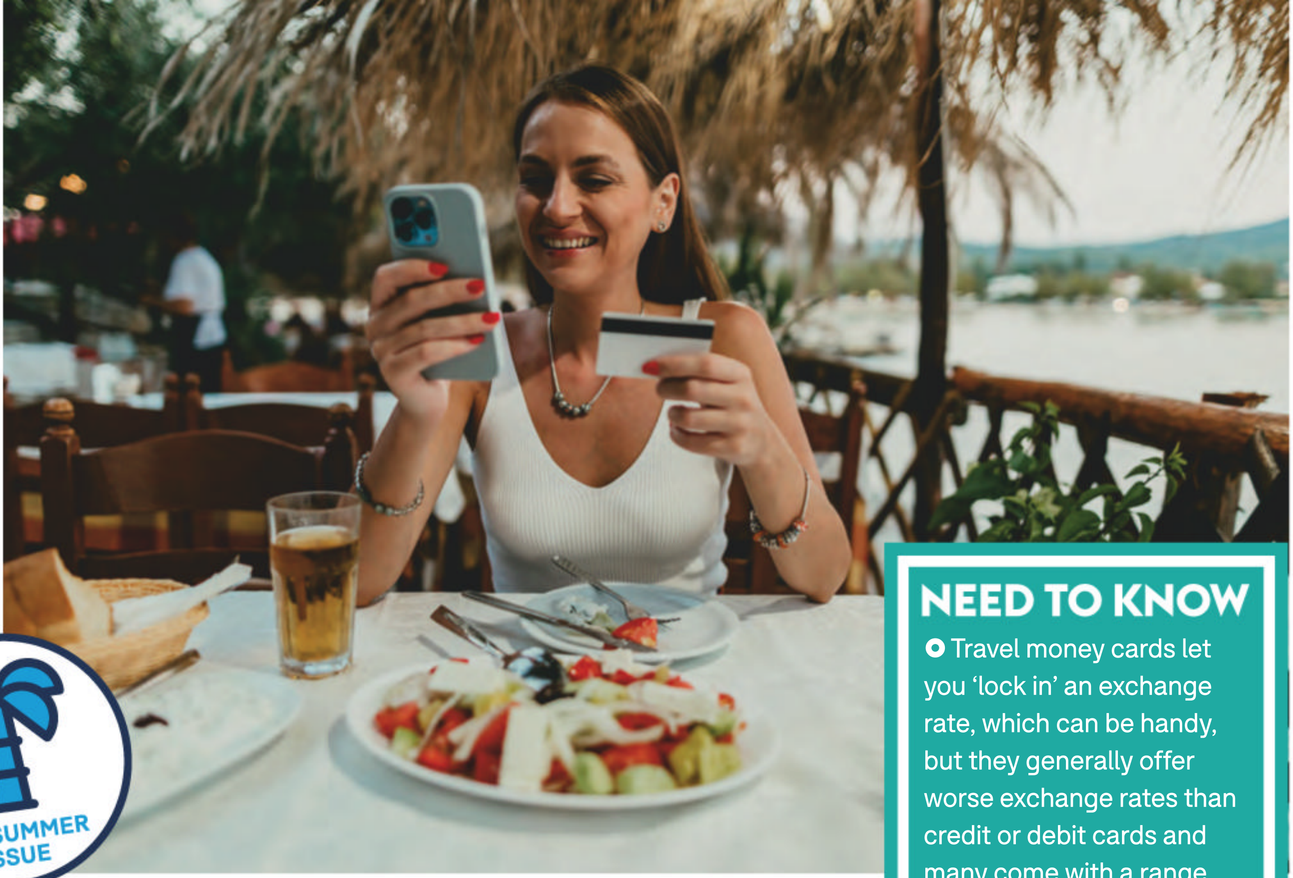
The RACV recommends this not just as a solution to the fuel-induced hit to your hip pocket, but also other ongoing outlays, as EVs typically have lower maintenance costs than petrol or diesel vehicles.

Our EV quick start guide (**choice.com.au/electric-vehicle-guide**) is a good place to begin if you're interested in going electric. It'll tell you how much you could save in the long term by switching to an EV and how the driving range of these vehicles compares to that of your petrol or diesel car. It also provides information on how to recharge them.

And once you've got your EV, fuel-saving tips (such as careful driving and removing unnecessary items from your car) will also help conserve your new vehicle's battery.

"While they're designed for petrol and diesel cars, [these tips are] just as valid when you're driving an electric car," says Ian Jeffreys. "You can apply the same tips and it will make the range on your EV that much further." ■

IMAGE: GETTY



Travel funds

Heading overseas? **Uta Mihm** and **Liam Kennedy** help you choose the right card to carry your cash

When planning an overseas trip, you always need to think about what you'll use for money once you get there. You'll most likely want to take some cash with you, as well as a card you can use for payments. But should you opt for a travel credit card, a debit card or a travel money card? Or a combination? We explain the different options and help you decide.

Travel money cards

A travel money card is a card you can load with money in different currencies. You can then take it overseas and use it like a regular debit card to spend and withdraw money in those currencies. These prepaid cards are offered by banks, airlines, foreign exchange retailers and other financial institutions.

All the common cards we're comparing here are operated by either Mastercard or Visa, so you'll be able to use them wherever you use most other debit or credit cards.

You can load a travel money card with multiple currencies at the same time, and manage it via a connected app or website, so you can top up your balance on the go.

It's worth noting that the exchange rate margins on travel money cards can be high, and a no-fee debit card is often a better option (although beware – the debit cards from the major banks are not a good option for overseas use).

> **You can load a travel money card with multiple currencies at the same time**

NEED TO KNOW

- Travel money cards let you 'lock in' an exchange rate, which can be handy, but they generally offer worse exchange rates than credit or debit cards and many come with a range of fees.
- Credit cards with no foreign exchange fees are good for instore transactions overseas and they often come with travel insurance, but we don't recommend using them for withdrawing cash.
- Debit cards with no or low fees for overseas transactions are a good option for both cash withdrawals and card payments overseas.

AUSTRALIA POST TRAVEL PLATINUM MASTERCARD

Fees:

- **Loading:** $5 online if using a debit card, 1% when using BPAY, 1.1% for AUD instore. Free methods available
- **ATM withdrawals:** 2.95% within Australia, $3.50 or local currency equivalent overseas
- **Cash out/closing:** $10

Minimum load: $100

No. of currencies supported: 11

CASH PASSPORT PLATINUM PREPAID CURRENCY CARD

Fees:

- **Loading:** 1.1% or $15 (whichever is greater) instore, 0.5% online if using a debit card. Free methods available, including bank transfer and BPAY
- **ATM withdrawals:** 2.95% within Australia, various charges overseas, depending on the local currency
- **Cash out/closing:** $10 if done manually; free online

Minimum load: $100

No. of currencies supported: 11

COMMONWEALTH BANK TRAVEL MONEY CARD

Fees:

- **ATM withdrawals:** $3.50 equivalent in local currency outside Australia

Minimum load: $50 when you first load the card, $1 for subsequent top-ups. Money must be loaded from another CommBank account

No. of currencies supported: 16. The only card we looked at supporting the Fijian Dollar; one of only two cards supporting the currencies of China and Vietnam; one of only three supporting the currencies of Indonesia and India

QANTAS PAY

Fees:

- **Account opening and card access:** Free for Frequent Flyer members; otherwise $99.50
- **Loading:** 0.5% if using a debit card. Free methods, including bank transfer and BPAY, are available.
- **ATM withdrawals:** Various charges overseas, depending on currency

Minimum load: $50

No. of currencies supported: 11

REVOLUT STANDARD ACCOUNT

Fees:

- **Physical card delivery:** $4.99
- **Loading:** 1% if using a local credit card, 2–2.25% if using a foreign credit card. Free methods available
- **Exchange:** Up to 1.5% after $2000 has been exchanged in a month, depending on timing of exchange

IMAGE: GETTY

Travel money cards may not be accepted as security for hotels and car rental agencies

- **ATM withdrawals:** 2% or $1.50 (whichever is greater) after you've made five withdrawals up to $350 in a month. *We've previously seen Revolut offer better exchange rates on popular currencies than most other travel money cards

Minimum load: No minimum

No. of currencies supported: 34. One of only three cards we looked at supporting the currencies of Indonesia and India

TRAVEL MONEY OZ CURRENCY PASS

Fees:

- **Loading:** Free for initial load. Up to 1.1% if reloading using Travel Money Oz app or website, 1% if using BPAY. Free reload methods available, including bank transfer and instore
- **ATM withdrawals:** 2.95% within Australia, various charges overseas, depending on the local currency
- **Cash out/closing:** $10

Minimum load: $20

No. of currencies supported: 10

TRAVELEX MONEY CARD

Fees:

- **Loading:** 1.1% or $15 (whichever is greater) when loading AUD instore. Instore loads of other currencies are free. 1% using BPAY and not via the Travelex website or app. Free methods available, including via the Travelex app or website
- **Inactivity:** $4 per month if you haven't used the card in 12 months. No fee if card balance is zero
- **Cash out/closing:** $10.

Minimum load: $350 when first loading the card online or via the app ($100 if done in-store); $50 for subsequent top-ups

No. of currencies supported: 10

WISE PERSONAL ACCOUNT

Fees:

- **Card access:** $10
- **Loading:** Free for AUD, but various fees for some other currencies
- **Exchange:** From 0.33%, depending on currency and amount being exchanged
- **ATM withdrawals:** 1.75%, plus $1.50 after you've made two withdrawals of up to $350 in a month

Minimum load: No minimum

No. of currencies supported: 47. One of only two cards we looked at supporting the currencies of China and Vietnam; one of only three supporting the currencies of Indonesia and India. *We've previously seen Wise offer better exchange rates on popular currencies than most other travel money cards.

NOTE: All figures in this comparison were sourced from the card issuers in October 2024. ▶

Tips for using travel money cards

- Make sure there are card payment facilities or ATMs at your destinations.
- Make sure the card supports the currencies you'll need (also consider stopovers).
- Load the card on days with good exchange rates.
- Make sure you can reload your card overseas in case you run out of funds while travelling.
- A card that has an app that can be linked to your bank account may be more convenient.
- Be aware of potential fees for making ATM withdrawals.
- Avoid loading more money than you need, in case there's a charge to get the balance back.
- Cancel the card after your trip, in case of inactivity fees.

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VALID THRU
MONTH/YEAR
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CARDHOLDER NAME

Travel money options at a glance

Travel money cards

PROS

- Pre-load to avoid exchange rate fluctuations disrupting your budget.
- Have money to use in multiple countries on the same card.
- You won't have to risk using cards linked to your Australian bank account overseas.
- You can avoid multiple conversion fees you'll pay if you take AUD.

CONS

- There may be fees to open and close your account or get the card.
- You'll likely be charged for ATM withdrawals, topping up or exchanging money on your card.
- The currency of the country you're visiting may not be supported.
- Won't be useful if you can't access ATMs or card payment facilities in your destination.
- The exchange rates are usually worse than those offered by Visa and Mastercard debit and credit cards.

Credit cards

PROS

- Some cards have $0 annual fees and/or $0 foreign exchange fees (we share a list of these below).
- Accepted as security for hotels and car rental agencies (travel money cards may not be.)
- Many come with travel insurance (some policies are only very basic, so read the PDS thoroughly).
- Visa and Mastercard credit cards are accepted almost everywhere for purchases and cash withdrawals.

CONS

- High fees for withdrawing cash – you'll be charged 3% when using cards issued by the major banks.
- If your card is stolen or skimmed, thieves will have access to funds held in your Australian bank account.
- Limited options for cards with no annual fees or foreign exchange fees.

Debit cards

PROS

- Some cards have $0 annual fees, $0 foreign exchange fee AND no cash withdrawal fee (we share some examples at right).
- You can open a separate account so that if your card is stolen or skimmed thieves won't have access to your other accounts.
- Most everyday debit cards are now on the Visa or Mastercard network, so are widely accepted.

CONS

- Cards from the big four banks charge high fees and exchange rate margins and are not a good option for spending overseas, so you'll probably have to take out a new account especially for travelling.

Credit cards for overseas travel

$0 ANNUAL FEE, $0 FOREIGN EXCHANGE FEE

These credit cards have no overseas online purchase or foreign exchange fees. But if you want a credit card that comes with included travel insurance, note that most of these come with only basic cover, and a few don't include it at all.

CREDIT CARD	INTEREST RATE (%)	ANNUAL FEE	TRAVEL INSURANCE
Bank First Visa Platinum	11.49	$99	✓
Bankwest Breeze Platinum	12.99	$59	✓
Bankwest More Platinum	19.99	$160	✓
Bankwest More World	19.99	$270	✓
Bankwest Qantas Platinum	19.99	$160	✓
Bankwest Qantas World	19.99	$270	✓
Bankwest Zero Platinum	18.99	$0	
Bendigo Bank Ready	19.99	$0	✓
CommBank Neo	na	$0–300 (B)	
CommBank Smart Awards	20.99	$0–228 (C)	✓
CommBank Ultimate Awards	20.99	$0–420 (C)	✓
HSBC Low Rate	12.99	$99	✓ (E)
Humm90 Platinum (A)	26.30	$119.40	
Latitude 28° Global Platinum	27.99	$96	
NAB StraightUp	na	$0–360 (D)	
Westpac Lite	9.90	$108	

TABLE NOTES Interest rate is for purchases; many cards have higher rates for cash advances. Some cards have introductory balance transfer offers at a lower rate. **Annual fee** is for one cardholder; additional fees may apply for additional cardholders. Some cards waive the annual fee in the first year, charge a monthly fee, or waive the monthly or annual fee if you spend above a certain amount and opt for online statements. **Travel insurance** refers to international travel insurance (unless otherwise specified), but the level of cover varies and may not meet your requirements. Conditions apply so you may need to activate it separately by paying a minimum amount on the card (such as $500 per person for your holiday) or activate it online before you leave. **(A)** Humm is a fintech company that also offers a buy now, pay later (BNPL) service through its app. In 2021, CHOICE gave Humm a Shonky Award. **(B)** $15 monthly fee applies for a $1000 limit, $20 for a $2000 limit, and $25 for a $3000 limit. The monthly fee is waived if you don't use your card and pay the total balance owing in full. **(C)** $0 monthly fee if you spend at least $2000 for Smart Awards and $4000 for Ultimate Awards per month, otherwise a $19 monthly fee for Smart Awards and $35 monthly fee for Ultimate Awards applies. A higher fee applies for the Qantas points version of both cards. **(D)** $10 monthly fee applies for a $1000 limit, $20 for a $2000 limit, and $30 for a $3000 limit. The monthly fee is waived if you don't use your card and have no outstanding balance during the statement period. **(E)** Domestic travel insurance only.

$0 ANNUAL FEE

Bankwest Zero Platinum Mastercard

- 18.99% purchase interest rate (21.99% cash advance interest rate).
- Higher of $4 or 3% cash advance fee.
- $6000 minimum credit limit.

Bendigo Bank Ready Mastercard

- Travel insurance (if aged under 76 years).
- 19.99% interest rate on purchases and cash advances.
- Higher of $3 or 3% cash advance fee.
- $3000 minimum credit limit.

Debit cards for overseas travel

The debit cards on these accounts are a good option to use when getting money from overseas ATMs, making purchases overseas such as hotel bookings, or for international online purchases. They have:

- no monthly account fee
- no fee for the debit card and debit card purchases
- no foreign exchange fee
- no fee for getting money from an overseas ATM (the operator of the foreign ATM may charge you a fee though).

Here are six low-fee travel debit card accounts:

- Bankwest Easy (Platinum)
- Macquarie (Platinum)
- Suncorp Carbon Insights
- Suncorp Everyday Options
- Ubank Spend
- Up Everyday.

CHOICE tip: Even if your card has no ATM fee, the foreign ATM may charge you a fee. Always check the ATM screen during the transaction to see what fees you're in for. ■

Even if your card has no ATM fee, the foreign ATM may charge you a fee

IMAGES: GETTY

THE SUMMER ISSUE

The essential travel insurance

Heading overseas? **Jodi Bird** helps you find the right cover without breaking the bank

It's taken a while, but the travel insurance market has reached peak competition again, since the end of the pandemic travel bans. Several insurers that left the market are back, along with some new competitors. With the increase in competition the average price of travel insurance has fallen slightly in the year to September 2024.

How to save on travel insurance

1. SHOP AROUND

It's important to compare travel insurance policies for both cost and cover. While the average price of travel insurance has fallen, well over half of the policies we have prices for actually increased in cost.

As we come into peak travel season, the insurers will jostle to win your business. You can easily shop around online, and sometimes you'll get a discount for doing so.

As we come into peak travel season, the insurers will jostle for your business

If you're a bargainer, negotiating with a website may get you nowhere, but if you're buying over the phone or through a travel agent, give it a go. Travel agents pocket a commission when they sell you insurance, so if you find a better deal elsewhere, ask them if they can beat it.

Consider whether your health, car or home insurance provider sells travel insurance.

Some companies give 10–15% discounts to existing members.

2. BUY EARLY

Almost two-thirds (62%) of overseas travellers who buy insurance do so on or before the day of booking travel. The further out from your departure date that you buy travel insurance, the more you're likely to pay for it, but you'll be covered from the moment you buy your policy.

For example, if you buy insurance two months before you fly, you effectively have cheap cover for any

NEED TO KNOW

- We recommend four insurers for the best combination of price and policy cover overall.
- We suggest you get at least three quotes at renewal time.
- Travel insurance prices aren't locked in, and they become very competitive as we approach peak travel season

events that affect your travel plans in those two months.

Left it until the last minute, or even later? Only a few insurers let you buy insurance once you're already overseas. Look for the 'Have you already left Australia?' checkbox when viewing the policy options.

3. COMPROMISE ON COVER

While good medical cover is always essential, you could save money on your premium by choosing a policy with lower or variable cover for cancellation, delays and lost baggage, especially if you aren't spending big on your holiday or taking expensive items with you.

4. USE YOUR CREDIT CARD

Some credit cards come with 'free' travel insurance when you use them to buy a ticket, pay for other travel expenses or otherwise activate it (we say 'free' because you'll pay a premium in fees for the card itself).

If you already have a credit card and use it regularly, the comprehensive travel insurance on your card can save you money. And if you're a regular traveller without a credit card, it's worth considering if you travel at least once a year or every second year internationally.

There are some tricks to bear in mind when it comes to credit card cover. For example, the excess on credit card policies tends to be fixed at a higher rate (usually around $250), whereas it's more variable on standalone policies. And chances are your credit card insurance won't automatically cover your pre-existing condition. You'll need to call your insurer and see if you need to pay an extra fee or premium.

Credit cards also vary in how you 'activate' the insurance cover. It usually activates when you buy your air tickets (or sometimes other transport or accommodation expenses) using your card, although some require you to 'register' your trip.

Other points to consider before relying on cover with your credit card:

- Policies require a minimum spend to activate – usually around $500. So if you scored your tickets on sale for $499, you won't be covered.
- If you want cover for your spouse or dependants, you must also buy their tickets on your card.
- Some policies only activate if you book a return ticket. A one-way flight, or even two one-way flights, will leave you uninsured.
- Some banks require you to notify them in order to get full coverage for each trip.
- Some cards will cover you if you use rewards points to buy your tickets. Others won't.

Only a few insurers let you buy insurance once you're already overseas

Case study 1

David* booked a trip to North America for himself and his family. The trip was cancelled because his 11-year-old daughter got pneumonia. Unfortunately, David only activated his credit card travel insurance about an hour before the family was scheduled to fly out of Australia. The travel insurer denied his claim for cancellation costs because he knew about his daughter's illness when he activated the policy.

***Not his real name**

How to make a complaint about your insurance claim

Sometimes it doesn't matter how well you've read the product disclosure statement, you and the insurer just have different opinions on what it means. But just because the insurer wrote it, doesn't mean they're right.

INTERNAL DISPUTE RESOLUTION

Have you been knocked back on an insurance claim and you wish to dispute it? The first step is to complain to your insurer.

Once you've lodged your case along with all of the supporting information and documents, the insurer then has 45 days to complete its internal dispute resolution process. They'll usually keep you up to date about the progress of your complaint every 10 business days.

EXTERNAL DISPUTE RESOLUTION

If you aren't happy with the insurer's decision, you can take your complaint to the Australian Financial Complaint Authority (AFCA). It will handle your case for free, mediating between you and the insurer to find a resolution.

If mediation is unsuccessful, it may make a preliminary assessment or give a determination straight away on your dispute. A determination is legally binding on the insurer, but not on you.

There's no appeal process with AFCA. For more information, visit afca.org.au.

The list of travel insurance disputes taken to AFCA reveals a battlefield of misinterpreted or unread terms and conditions. Between 1 July 2023 and 30 June 2024, AFCA received 2054 travel insurance complaints. ▶

IMAGE: GETTY

AFCA received 1679 travel insurance complaints in the 2022–2023 financial year

Case study 2

Katherine's luggage was stolen from the designated cargo section on board a bus in Barcelona. The insurer declined her claim for 2500 Euro in losses (over $4000). According to the insurer, Katherine should have had the bag on her lap, or stood beside the bag in the cargo section of the bus, instead of leaving it "unattended". AFCA ruled in Katherine's favour, saying it "was not reasonably possible for the complainant to avoid leaving her bag unattended in the circumstances".

Top scoring policies

Cover-more Comprehensive: Underwritten by Zurich, Cover-more is one of the largest travel insurers in Australia. The comprehensive policy scores well for a broad range of cover and as we near the peak travel season, this policy is priced more competitively. Several policy cover items are 'optional' so you'll pay extra to cover cancellation, cruises, mopeds and skiing.

Bupa Essentials: This policy is a good example of how to save money by cutting cover. It scores well for cheap prices relative to the competition. For the price, you get lower baggage cover and lose cover for existing medical conditions, cruises and adventure activities such as mopeds and skiing. But the standard of cover you get for the price compared to many other policies is good value.

Southern Cross Travel Insurance Comprehensive: This insurer is a regular favourite of CHOICE members, with a broad range of comprehensive cover at a competitive price.

Medibank Comprehensive: Another product underwritten by Zurich that comes from the same provider as Cover-more and Bupa. Even though it's the same provider, these policies all have variances in cover and price. The Medibank policy scores slightly better for overall cover.

		PERFORMANCE			SPECIFICATIONS				
Recommended	Policy (underwriter)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Cover score (%)	Price score (%)	Age limit	Medical ($)	Cancellation ($)	Baggage ($)	Cruise
✓	**Bupa** Essentials (Zurich)	73	71	76	74	Unlimited	Cover chosen	5000	
✓	**Cover-More** Comprehensive (Zurich)	72	79	63	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	15,000	O
✓	**Medibank** Comprehensive (Zurich)	70	84	48	99	Unlimited	Unlimited	15,000	O
✓	**Southern Cross Travel Insurance** Comprehensive (Southern Cross)	70	77	60	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	25,000	O
	Cover-More Basic (Zurich)	68	66	71	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	5000	O
	AHM Medical Only (Zurich)	68	51	92	85	Unlimited	0	0	O
	World2Cover Top (Tokio Marine)	68	78	52	75	Unlimited	Unlimited	15,000	O
	Worldcare Comprehensive (Allianz)	67	73	59	100+	$20 million	Cover chosen	10,000	O
	Worldcare Essential (Allianz)	67	70	62	74	$20 million	Cover chosen	5000	
	Virgin Australia Travel Safe International (Zurich)	67	60	78	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	0	O
	Allianz Comprehensive (Allianz)	67	73	59	100+	$20 million	Cover chosen	10,000	O
	Webjet Travel Safe International (Zurich)	67	60	78	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	0	O
	Webjet Travel Safe Plus International (Zurich)	66	78	47	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	15,000	O
	1Cover Comprehensive (Lloyds)	66	65	67	100+	Unlimited	Unlimited	15,000	O
	AHM Comprehensive (Zurich)	66	79	47	85	Unlimited	Cover chosen	8000	O
	Medibank Medical Only (Zurich)	66	52	86	99	Unlimited	0	0	O
	Virgin Australia Travel Safe Plus International (Zurich)	66	78	47	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	15,000	O
	World2Cover Essentials (Tokio Marine)	66	64	70	75	Unlimited	25,000	7500	O
	Tick Travel Insurance Top (Mitsui Sumitomo)	66	60	75	100	Unlimited	20,000	7500	
	Tick Travel Insurance Standard (Mitsui Sumitomo)	66	57	81	100	Unlimited	5,000	4000	
	Travel Insurance Direct Basics (NIB)	65	63	69	74	Unlimited	Cover chosen	2000	✓
	RACQ Premium (RACQ)	65	79	43	75	Unlimited	Unlimited	15,000	O
	RACQ Standard (RACQ)	65	64	66	75	Unlimited	25,000	7500	O
	RAA Essentials (RAA)	64	64	65	75	Unlimited	25,000	7500	O
	RAA Premium (RAA)	64	79	41	75	Unlimited	Unlimited	15,000	O
	RACV Comprehensive (Tokio Marine)	64	79	42	75	Unlimited	Unlimited	15,000	O
	RACV Essentials (Tokio Marine)	64	64	65	75	Unlimited	25,000	7500	O
	RACT Essentials (Tokio Marine)	64	64	64	75	Unlimited	25,000	7500	O
	RACT Comprehensive (Tokio Marine)	64	79	40	75	Unlimited	Unlimited	15,000	O
	Southern Cross Travel Insurance Medical Only (Southern Cross)	63	43	92	100+	Unlimited	0	0	
	Tick Travel Insurance Basic (Mitsui Sumitomo)	63	40	98	69	Unlimited	0	2000	
	Tick Travel Insurance Budget (Mitsui Sumitomo)	63	43	92	79	Unlimited	5,000	2500	
	RAC Essentials (RAC)	63	64	61	75	Unlimited	25,000	7500	O
	NIB Essentials (NIB)	63	66	59	69	Unlimited	Cover chosen	5000	✓
	Flight Centre YourCover Essentials (Zurich)	63	67	57	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	8000	O
	InsureandGo Gold (Mitsui Sumitomo)	63	67	57	100	Unlimited	Unlimited	15,000	O
	RAC Comprehensive (RAC)	62	79	36	75	Unlimited	Unlimited	15,000	O
	PassportCard Comprehensive (Guild)	62	75	42	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	25,000	O
	NRMA Essentials (Zurich)	61	67	53	69	$10 million	Cover chosen	5000	O
	NRMA Comprehensive (Zurich)	61	77	38	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	12,000	O
	World2Cover Basics (Tokio Marine)	61	45	85	75	Unlimited	0	2000	O
	Qantas International Comprehensive (AIG)	61	79	35	100+	Unlimited	Unlimited	15,000	✓
	InsureandGo Silver (Mitsui Sumitomo)	60	58	64	100	Unlimited	15,000	6000	O
	RACQ Saver (RACQ)	60	45	82	100+	Unlimited	0	2000	O
	InsureandGo Bare Essentials (Mitsui Sumitomo)	60	39	90	79	Unlimited	0	2000	O
	Go Insurance Go Basic (Lloyds)	60	62	56	75	Unlimited	5,000	2500	O
	Bupa Comprehensive (Zurich)	59	74	36	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	10,000	O

TABLE NOTES
We review over 75 travel insurance policies and score them based on their policy cover (how much they cover compared to other products) and how competitive their pricing is (based on thousands of online quotes). We combine these to produce the **CHOICE Expert Rating**, a score out of 100 that reflects their level of cover and value for money. Only those with a score of 60 or over are listed in the table. **Price score** The higher the price score, the cheaper the policy is relative to the competitors. **Cover chosen** means you choose the level of cover you want for cancellation. **O** Optional. ■

IMAGE: GETTY

Dinner box

Need to get out of the weekday dinner rut? **Rebecca Ciaramidaro** helps you find the best meal box and prepared meal delivery services

Sometimes doing the grocery shopping and cooking meals from scratch just isn't an option. You might be juggling work and study, at home with a new baby, recovering from an illness or simply time-poor. Maybe you're sick of trying to decide what's for dinner week in and week out. Or maybe cooking just isn't your thing.

You could settle for eating toast or takeaways, or you could use a meal delivery service: either a food box with pre-measured ingredients and recipes to cook yourself, or prepared meals delivered fresh or frozen to your door.

Fiona Mair, CHOICE home economist and one of our testers, found a lot to recommend in the meal delivery services we tested.

"Food box or meal kit services such as HelloFresh and QuiteLike are predominantly marketed to time-poor families. But if you have limited cooking skills and want to eat home-cooked food, they can also be a great way to learn how to cook," Mair says.

She says the recipes are generally simple and relatively easy to follow, the ingredients are already portioned, and there's usually a utensil or tool list of what you need in your kitchen along with a list of the pantry staples you'll need.

"After a month of preparing a few meals from a meal delivery service you'll have a repertoire of recipes under your belt that will give you confidence to shop and cook for yourself. You'll also become familiar with flavours and cuisines that you may not have tried before," she adds.

When it comes to prepared meal delivery services like The Dinner Ladies and Youfoodz, Mair says "these are convenient for people who are time-poor and not so interested in cooking a meal".

You can choose from single-serve or larger portions, and they usually just need to be heated and served (although some require you to add your own sides). You can even make a large order and stockpile them in the freezer for later use to save on shipping.

If you have limited cooking skills and want to eat home-cooked food, meal kits can be a great way to learn to cook

Food box delivery services

BENEFITS

If you enjoy cooking but meal planning gives you a headache, you're lacking inspiration or you find it hard to make time for the weekly shop, then food box delivery services could be a good option. Each week these subscription services deliver recipes and the precise quantity of the predominantly fresh ingredients you'll need to cook them.

When we surveyed people who use these services, a major drawcard was the minimal food waste associated with being supplied the exact quantities of ingredients required for each recipe. This is particularly beneficial with ingredients you're unlikely to use frequently. If you've ever bought a huge bag of fenugreek for a recipe only to use one teaspoon of it in four years, then you'll be able to relate.

The majority of users said they found the recipes to be simple and easy to follow, and obviously cooking with pre-measured ingredients means you can turn the meal around in less time than if you were starting from scratch.

The fact that these services promote their use of Australian ingredients was also an attraction for many.

VALUE FOR MONEY

In the past we've compared the price of a HelloFresh box with the equivalent ingredients needed to make the recipes from Coles and Woolworths.

We found you don't actually pay much less at a supermarket, and sometimes you pay more once you factor in delivery costs if you're ordering online.

But in reality, when doing your weekly shop you're more likely to take advantage of special offers or buy larger packs, which may offer better value for money. And as long as you end up using the leftover ingredients before they reach their use-by or best-before dates and need to be discarded, then it's cheaper to do the shopping yourself.

TIPS AND TRAPS

- You'll need to have a range of everyday ingredients on hand that frequently feature in the recipes. These may include soy sauce, white vinegar, salt and pepper, honey, oil, butter, milk, eggs, flour and sugar.
- When signing up to these services, some companies will collect personal information upfront before you can even view what's on offer. In other cases, only a minimum amount of details are needed initially, and payment card details only once meals are selected.
- Some services will bombard you with emails to subscribe, or with special offers once subscribed.
- Meals are usually pre-selected. If you want to customise your order you'll need to remember to delete the pre-selections or you might be charged for them.
- The amount of packaging may be a deterrent, with each pre-measured ingredient in its own bag or container.
- Choose a delivery window where you're likely to be home to collect it soon after delivery to ensure food stays within the safe temperature range.

IMAGES: MARLEY SPOON / GETTY / QUITELIKE

BEST FOOD BOX SERVICE

84%

QuiteLike

This meal box delivery service offers a great selection of meals that cater to special dietary needs such as pescatarian, vegetarian, vegan and meat-free. The ingredients we received were very fresh on delivery, divided into paper bags and grouped based on the recipes. The method is clear and easy to follow, with photos of each step and the estimated cooking time, allergy and nutritional information all listed on the recipe card. The meals we created looked a lot like the picture and portion sizes were generous. ▶

Prepared meal delivery services

BENEFITS

These services offer predominantly fully prepared meals. Ordering is simply a matter of choosing from the range of meals, and the chilled or frozen meals will arrive in a coolbox on your chosen delivery date.

When we surveyed users of these services, they told us what they liked most was the minimal preparation required – in most cases, little more than heating. Another benefit is being able to stockpile meals in the freezer to use later.

VALUE FOR MONEY

People who used prepared meal services were more likely to consider them good value for money than those using food box services.

Some services like Youfoodz and Soulara are available to buy in select supermarkets. If you can find them in the supermarket you won't be paying the delivery cost that's added to any online orders.

TIPS AND TRAPS

- The meals from some of these services focus predominantly on the protein component, with nary a vegetable in sight. They suggest you add a salad or vegetable side dish – and usually offer these to buy – but this will bump up the total cost. Keep this in mind when comparing meal prices.
- Some of these services offer a good selection of freshly prepared, chilled meals, while others sell predominantly frozen meals. If this difference is important to you, make sure you're clear on what they're offering before you order.
- The meals on offer are usually "wet meals" like braised meats, curries, pasta, stir fry, rice and stews that are usually covered in a sauce of gravy. This is so the food doesn't dry out when heated in the microwave and so each component can heat as evenly as possible. It's easy to get sick of eating meals like this that are soft with minimal texture.
- Services like Providoor and The Dinner Ladies have meals with a wider variety of textures and options to serve 1–6+ people. Heating instructions may require an oven, cooktop or microwave to prepare.

BEST PREPARED MEAL SERVICE

82%

Providoor

This is a pay-as-you-go service providing a wide variety of frozen meals (note that some will need defrosting before heating). Service and delivery were great, and the meals designed by well-known chefs like Luke Nguyen and Christine Manfield were delicious, with high-quality ingredients and generous portions. Unless you want to pay extra to add them to your order, you'll often need to add your own sides like vegetables, rice or noodles, which can be annoying, especially as the meals are not cheap. However, in most cases you're getting a two-person serving size for the price paid, unlike most other prepared meal services that usually provide a one-person serving. Larger servings are available to cater for families or groups.

The Dinner Ladies

82%

The Dinner Ladies

This is another pay-as-you-go service providing frozen meals ready to be heated and eaten (although some will need to be defrosted in advance). The meals are generous, tasty and look good, and the heating instructions are easy to follow. You may need to add your own sides, which you can buy from The Dinner Ladies if you don't mind paying extra for them.

		COSTS		PERFORMANCE								SPECIFICATIONS							
Recommended		Price ($)	Average cost per person per meal ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Meal rating score (%)	Ordering/delivery score (%)	Performance score (%)	Order accuracy score (%)	Safe temperature on delivery score (%)	Freshness score (%)	Ease of recipes score (%)	Number of meal options offered weekly	App available	Available in Qld	Available in WA	Available in SA	Available in Tas	Available in ACT	Available in NT
FOOD BOX																			
✓	**QuiteLike**	143.99	12.00	84	73	90	88	100	80	90	80	30		✓				✓	
✓	**EveryPlate**	89.99	7.50	83	77	84	86	100	100	90	80	27	✓	✓	✓			✓	
✓	**Marley Spoon**	153.83	12.82	83	75	82	88	100	80	90	80	>100	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	HelloFresh	134.99	11.25	76	67	84	79	100	100	70	80	44	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
	Dinnerly	94.37	7.86	74	72	80	72	80	100	70	70	>100	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Pepper Leaf	144.90	12.08	74	69	86	72	100	100	90	70	20		✓		✓		✓	
	Make-out Meals	165.00	13.75	70	65	90	65	80	100	60	60	15						✓	
FROZEN PREPARED MEALS																			
✓	**Providoor**	201.00	14.36	82	76	98	79	100	100	90	70	30		✓					
✓	**The Dinner Ladies**	168.50	12.04	82	75	98	80	100	100	80	80	72		✓		✓		✓	
	Gourmet Dinner Service	107.75	15.39	78	74	98	73	100	100	90	70	>52		✓				✓	
FRESH PREPARED MEALS																			
	Thrive	98.65	14.09	70	62	80	70	100	70	80	70	40		✓	✓			✓	
	Chefgood	95.30	13.61	69	58	76	73	100	60	70	80	>40		✓		✓	✓	✓	
	Nourish'd	107.20	15.31	69	61	88	66	100	90	70	70	20 (A)		✓		✓	✓	✓	
	Youfoodz	86.92	12.42	68	54	88	68	100	90	60	80	60	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Soulara	91.30	13.04	61	47	90	58	100	90	40	70	39		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

TABLE NOTES

Recommended We recommend meal delivery services with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 80%. **Price** This is the price we paid for the plan purchased for the test. For food boxes we purchased a family box, which included 3 meals for four people. For prepared meals we bought 7 single-serve meals, except for Providoor and The Dinner Ladies, where we bought 7 meals that each served two people (rather than single-serve). Delivery is included in the price, but discounts applied at checkout are not. **(A)** 60 meals on the menu but 20 offered each week. All services provided the exact quantity of ingredients needed, but for all frozen meals you will need to add your own side dishes if desired. All are available in NSW and Vic. Allergen information is provided for all services except for Pepper Leaf. ■

IMAGE: GETTY / THRIVE MEALS / THE DINNER LADIES / PROVISOOR / HELLO FRESH

Smoothie-makers

THE SUMMER ISSUE

If a smoothie is a non-negotiable part of your daily routine, you might want to consider a blender you can take on holiday. **Rebecca Ciaramidaro** and **Pru Engel** explain

Blenders are a handy appliance in any kitchen.

Traditional benchtop blenders have some similar functions to food processors, but their construction is different. They usually have a narrow jug with blades at the bottom, making them ideal for creating fruit smoothies and milkshakes, blending soups and making sauces.

But while traditional blenders are a useful benchtop staple, if you drink smoothies daily you might want to consider buying a smaller single-serve blender especially for the task. They're usually simple to use, and they save on time and washing up by allowing you to blend and drink out of the same container. Plus, they're generally small and lightweight, so can be brought along on trips and holidays.

A single-serve blender can be brought along on trips and holidays

Choosing the right type

STANDARD BLENDER

- Larger capacity – good for making smoothies for more than one person at a time.
- Usually more powerful and versatile than a personal blender (though not as powerful as a high-performance blender, which we reviewed in *CHOICE* Nov 24).
- More blend settings.
- For single serves some models come with a 'personal cup' so you can blend and drink from the same cup.

PERSONAL BLENDER

- Usually cheaper.
- Simple to use with usually just a pulse button.
- Lighter and more portable.
- Blend and drink from the same cup.
- Usually have to add liquid – can't blend solids on their own.

Smoothies to go

While one of the main benefits of personal blenders is being able to quickly blend up a smoothie and head straight out the door while sipping it straight from the blending cup, another is that the machines are so portable they can be brought with you on holiday.

Taking your blender away with you can be a smart move if you're staying at a holiday house, or even a hotel – a portable model should fit easily on the desk or bench space in even the smallest hotel room. Grab some fresh ingredients and store them in the mini-fridge and voila, you can save a fortune on hotel or cafe breakfasts and continue your healthy smoothie habits on holiday.

Off-grid drinks: Battery-operated & portable

While mains-powered personal blenders are pretty convenient for most holidays, if you want to take fresh smoothies even further, you could consider a battery-operated portable model. They're compact enough to fit in your bag or backpack and can be used in places where there's no power outlet available (provided you charge them before your trip).

Not only are they handy for off-grid holidays like camping, they can also be used to blend fresh smoothies in your car or on a day out hiking. Some people may argue you could just pack a pre-made smoothie in those situations, but if you've ever tried that before you'll know that hours-old smoothies can be a little gross – they often oxidise and separate in that time, making them significantly less appealing.

We haven't yet lab-tested any portable blenders, but CHOICE staffer Pru Engel took one out for a real-life road test (see page 48).

What to look for

Here are some things to consider if you're looking to buy a personal blender.

Multiple cups/jugs: Handy if you want to prepare a single-serve smoothie each for a few people.

Cleaning: If the bottle is narrow, you may need to use a bottle brush to thoroughly clean it.

On/off switch: This is better than a push-and-twist type, which may put more wear and tear on the blender.

Rubber seal: One that sits on the outside of the blade assembly instead of under the blade will be easier to remove. The rubber seal should also sit firmly within the blade assembly – seals can become loose over time and cause leaks.

Blade assembly: Should have adequate grip (though some become tighter after processing and can be difficult to remove). The threading around the blade assembly and the cup/bottle should be smooth and easy to screw on firmly to prevent leaks.

Drainage hole: Helpful inside the shaft area for draining any spills.

Mains or battery-powered: Most personal blenders plug into an electrical outlet, but some ultra-portable models are powered by a rechargeable battery (see p48 for our look at one of these models). ▶

IMAGE: GETTY

Road testing the Ninja Blast

When the school holidays rolled around this year and I found myself road tripping with my vegetable-averse 3-year-old and my smoothie-loving 7-year-old, taking along a portable blender seemed like an ingenious idea. I could blend nutritious fresh smoothies for my kids on the go without taking up too much boot space.

We haven't yet tested the Ninja Blast in our labs, so this was a great opportunity to put this much-hyped blender to the test. Here's what I found.

> The USB-C charging cable is quite short and you'll need to bring your own charger

PERFORMANCE

While on holidays, our go-to ingredients for smoothies were bananas, whatever leftover berries or fruit we had from the previous day's snacking and coconut water or milk.

The Ninja Blast made light work of these smooth ingredients, and just two or three 30-second blitzes made for smooth fruit blends the kids loved (no need for shaking or stirring of ingredients). I was impressed with the performance of such a compact unit, and it wasn't anywhere near as noisy as our full-size blender at home. It also easily coped with chunks of frozen mango – a win all round.

But a few problems arose when I added ice cubes and fibrous vegies such as kale into the mix.

The blender instructions specify to add liquid ingredients first. With such a small surface area across the base of the blender, this is vital to prevent ingredients getting lodged under the blades and causing them to stick.

But the first time I attempted to blend roughly chopped kale with banana, coconut water and ice, the blades became stuck, even though I added the liquid ingredients first, and I had to shake it multiple times to dislodge the blockage.

After another three or four 30-second blasts, I was able to get a relatively smooth green smoothie (there were definitely still bits, but a few more blitzes may sort that out). Loose spinach leaves might be a better option if you want to pack in some greens without compromising on texture.

When you consider that even some full-sized blenders struggle to blend kale and ice, this is a pretty good result for such a small, battery-powered unit.

EASE OF USE

The Ninja Blast is easy to use. You just charge, add ingredients and push a button to blend.

It took about two hours to fully charge, and lasted for 10–12 rounds of 30-second blends – which was much more than I'd expected of such a small appliance.

A small annoyance is that the USB-C charging cable provided is quite short (about 40cm) and you'll need your own USB wall socket or charger. You could of course use a longer USB-C cable to charge, or plug the base into a laptop or other charging device.

The spout is easy to drink from and the unit it very easy to clean (the base rinses easily and you can pop the cup into the dishwasher), and it also has a carry handle, although you can't separate the rechargeable base from the container, which I think makes it a little too heavy to carry in a bag over long distances.

THE VERDICT

Compact, easy to use and transport, and suitable for blending a variety of ingredients (but less effective at blending ice and fibrous greens like kale), the Ninja Blast blender earned its stripes on our family holiday. It made preparing nutritious smoothies for the family while on the go easy and gave consistent results. I would definitely take it away on holiday with us again, and I can also see myself using it at home to whizz up salad dressings and dips.

I think its capabilities and portability justify the price tag.

PRU ENGEL

NINJA BLAST

PRICE $79.99

CONTACT ninjakitchen.com.au

★★★★☆

FIRST LOOK
NINJA

PERSONAL BLENDERS			PERFORMANCE								SPECIFICATIONS								
Recommended		Price ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Green smoothie test score (%)	Kale blending test score (%)	Crush ice score (%)	Dry milling nuts score (%)	Noise (dBA)	Blender construction	Jug type	Number of speeds	Speed cut out	Weight (kg)	Weight of jug (kg)	Jug capacity (L)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Warranty (yr)
✓	**Ninja** Nutri-Blender Pro With Auto IQ BN500ANZ	160	80	86	70	100	42	100	na	80	P	PB	2	✓	2.6	0.5	0.5 / 0.7 / 0.9	41 x 16 x 17	2
	Anko 900W Nutritional Pro Blender SKU: P_43113620	69	79	89	63	100	65	100	70	76	P	PB	1	✓	2.1	0.4	0.5 / 0.8	38 x 13 x 13	1
	NutriBullet Pro 1000 NB07100-1008DG	180	78	84	70	100	97	40	na	81	P	P	1		2.3	0.4	0.6 / 0.7	35 x 14 x 16	1
	Kuvings Nutri Blender – Phantom Black KNB-200B (PB)	199	73	79	63	100	17	100	90	77	M	PB	1	✓	2.3	0.4	0.3 / 0.7	37 x 14 x 14	1
	NutriBullet Select 1200 NB07200-1210DG	200	70	68	72	90	53	30	na	93	P	P	3		2.6	0.4	0.6 / 0.7 / 0.9	34 x 16 x 17	1
	Russell Hobbs Mix and Go Classic Stainless Steel RHBL300	50	62	63	60	70	0	80	na	70	M	PB	1	ns	1.1	0.2	0.6 / 0.6	38 x 13 x 13	2
	Smeg 50s Style Personal Blender (PBF01BLAU)	199	62	63	60	50	0	100	na	73	D	PB	2	✓	1.5	0.2	0.6 /0.6	34 x 14 x 14	2
	Sunbeam Insta Go Blender White PBP1000WH	50	62	60	65	90	0	50	na	82	P	P	1		0.8	0.2	0.6	34 x 11 x 11	1

STANDARD BLENDERS			PERFORMANCE							SPECIFICATIONS								
Recommended		Price ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Kale blending test score (%)	Crush ice score (%)	Chopping carrots score (%)	Noise (dBA)	Blender construction	Jug type	Jug lock	Speed cut out	Weight (kg)	Weight of jug (kg)	Jug capacity (L)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Warranty (yr)
✓	**Breville** The Fresh and Furious BBL620SIL	319	82	85	77	39	100	100	85	M	PB		ns	4.0	1.0	1.5	47 x 22 x 22	2
✓	**Magimix** Blender Power 3 11641AU	349	80	85	72	61	100	80	74	M	G		✓	4.8	2.0	1.2	39 x 18 x 19	(A)
✓	**Sunbeam** PB8080 Two Way Blender	229	80	80	80	20	100	100	85	P	P	✓		3.1	1.0	2.0	40 x 18 x 20	1
	Magimix Power Blender 4	449	76	78	72	10	100	100	76	P/M	G		✓	5.0	2.3	1.8	43 x 16 x 18	3
	BioChef Galaxy KT-BL-BC-GL-AU-WH	239	74	80	65	38	100	80	83	P	G	✓	ns	3.7	1.9	1.75	44 x 22 x 21	1
	Breville The Kinetix twist BBL405	190	73	70	77	18	100	60	74	P	P		ns	2.6	0.8	1.5	43 x 19 x 20	1
	Smeg 50s Style Blender (BLF01PGAU)	329	71	76	63	63	90	50	80	D	PB		✓	3.5	1.0	1.5	40 x 16 x 18	2
	Sunbeam ActiveSense Blender PBT7000SS	449	67	63	73	20	100	50	77	P	PB		ns	3.3	1.0	2.0	43 x 19 x 21	1
	Russell Hobbs Desire Matte Black Blender RHBL5BLK	80	66	68	63	43	75	75		P	G		ns	3.6	1.8	1.5	42 x 21 x 19	2
	Tefal Blender Blendforce Piano BL477	120	65	64	67	25	80	50		P	P	✓	ns	2.0	0.5	1.25	38 x 18 x 22	1

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend personal and standard blenders with a CHOICE Expert Rating of 80% or more. **Price** as of October 2024. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of performance (60%) and ease of use (40%). **Performance** is based on how each type of blender performs its core tasks. **Blender construction P** Plastic, **M** Metal, **D** Die cast. **Jug type G** Glass, **P** Plastic, **PB** Plastic jug with BPA free claim. **(A)** 30 years (motor), 3 years (parts and accessories). **na** Not applicable. **ns** Not stated. Not all tests are conducted on all blenders, but common tests are comparable across types. ■

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING
Anko	C
Breville	D
NutriBullet	F
Russell Hobbs	D
Smeg	B
Sunbeam	F
Tefal	C

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

Pod squad

Dishwasher tablets and pods top the test, but where does that leave powder, gel and sheets? **Pru Engel** walks us through the results

It's a sad moment when you unload your dishwasher only to find bits of grime still stuck to plates or less-than-sparkling glasses.

If you're seeing shoddy results from your dishwasher and you're confident you don't just have a poorly performing model, dirty filters or poor stacking technique, perhaps your detergent is to blame.

The amount of money you spend on dishwasher detergent over the life of your dishwasher is equal to the cost of the actual dishwasher, so it's worth your while making sure you're choosing a detergent that's up to the task.

But with an overwhelming number of products available on the supermarket shelves, all promising to deliver cups and plates so clean you can, well, eat off them, how do you know which one offers the best value for money? And just as importantly, which type of dishwasher detergent should you buy?

While tablets and pods tend to be more expensive, they outperform powder in our tests

"There's a big difference between the effectiveness of different dishwashing detergents," says Matthew Steen, head of reviews and testing at CHOICE. "And whether you're using a tablet, gel or powder can really show up in the wash."

Tablets and pods vs powder

The classic style of dishwasher tablets contain just the detergent, compacted into a tablet shape. The newer style tablets are sometimes called 'tabs', 'pods', 'capsules' or 'all-in-ones', and also contain liquid ingredients such as rinse aid in a dissolvable pouch.

Our testing has found that while tablets and pods tend to be more expensive, they outperform powder in our dishwasher detergent tests.

This is because they usually contain ingredients such as dishwasher salt, rinsing agent and detergent in one easy dose. They're more concentrated than powder or gel detergents alone, and are designed to deliver the perfectly formulated amount for each dishwasher load.

Dishwashing powder, on the other hand, is generally less effective as it's just the detergent with no salt or rinsing agent.

What about gels and sheets?

Dishwasher liquids or gels are useful for some drawer-type dishwashers that can't use tablets, and are convenient as you can dose as little or as much as you like in your detergent dispenser.

But even though gels can be cheaper than some tablets, they're generally not as effective as tablets or pods. They can also contain a higher quantity of surfactants than tablets or powder – these are compounds commonly found in detergents that can be detrimental to the environment.

We tested three gel products in our latest review, and the results were underwhelming. Scores ranged from 41% to 59%.

Dishwasher detergent sheets are a relatively new entry to the market. They're touted as being biodegradable, plastic-free, gentle on sensitive skin and less allergenic than traditional dishwasher detergents.

We tested two detergent sheet products alongside traditional dishwasher detergents. They were the lowest scoring products overall, one with a CHOICE Expert Rating of just 30% and the other with 33%.

The cheapest pod in our test was also one of the best performing products overall

With some development detergent sheets may end up being great, but for now our test results suggest they need work.

You won't see all the gels and sheets we tested in the table because we only included the products with a CHOICE Expert Rating of 55% or more. You can see the full results at **choice.com.au/dishwasherdetergent**.

IMAGE: GETTY | WEIGHTLESS CLEAN

Price doesn't always equal performance

If you've been looking for ways to save on your grocery bills, you may have zeroed in on your expensive dishwasher tabs.

The good news is our testing often finds that price doesn't always equal performance, and you don't have to switch to a poor-performing but cheaper powder to save money. There are plenty of cheaper dishwasher tablets that get great results in our testing.

In fact, the cheapest pod in our test, **Aldi Logix Platinum Dishwasher Capsules**, was also one of the best performing products overall (it shared top place with two other products). It costs 26 cents a wash, and has a CHOICE Expert Rating of 76%.

You can save even more with **Aldi Logix All In One Dishwasher Tablets** at just 14 cents a wash. With a CHOICE Expert Rating of 72%, it doesn't quite make the cut to be recommended (we recommend products that score 75% or more) but it outperformed other tablet products costing more than twice as much.

If you can't access an Aldi store but still want a high-performing dishwasher detergent at a low price, your next best bet is probably the **Finish Powerball Quantum All In 1 Tabs**, with a CHOICE Expert Rating of 75%. They're the second-cheapest of the recommended products, and 44 cents a wash is still great value. ▶

How to save money on dishwasher tablets

When a good dishwasher tab can cost you as much as $1.50 a wash, it's worth looking for ways to save on this household expense.

1. BUY IN BULK AND LOOK FOR SPECIALS

Buy dishwasher tablets in larger bulk-sized packets, stock up when on special and scrutinise unit prices to ensure you are getting the cheapest price possible – always look at the price per item to compare. Keep in mind, however, that the shelf life of dishwasher tablets is around one to two years, so don't stockpile tablets as their effectiveness may deteriorate over time.

2. BE ECONOMICAL

Run full loads to use fewer tablets, or try cutting your dishwasher tablets in half – this could affect the washing performance, but there won't be any harm done!

3. BYPASS THE DISPENSER

Detergent dispensers are designed for powders. If you're using tablets, just toss it straight into the bottom of your dishwasher tub – this maximises the time the tablet has to dissolve and do its thing. This tip is particularly worth trying if you find your tablets aren't dissolving properly or if you're using a faster cycle.

4. PACK LIKE A PRO

To get the best results from your dishwasher tablets and to save you having to run another load when your plates aren't cleaned properly, make sure you stack your dishwasher correctly (see our guide below) and don't pre-rinse your dishes.

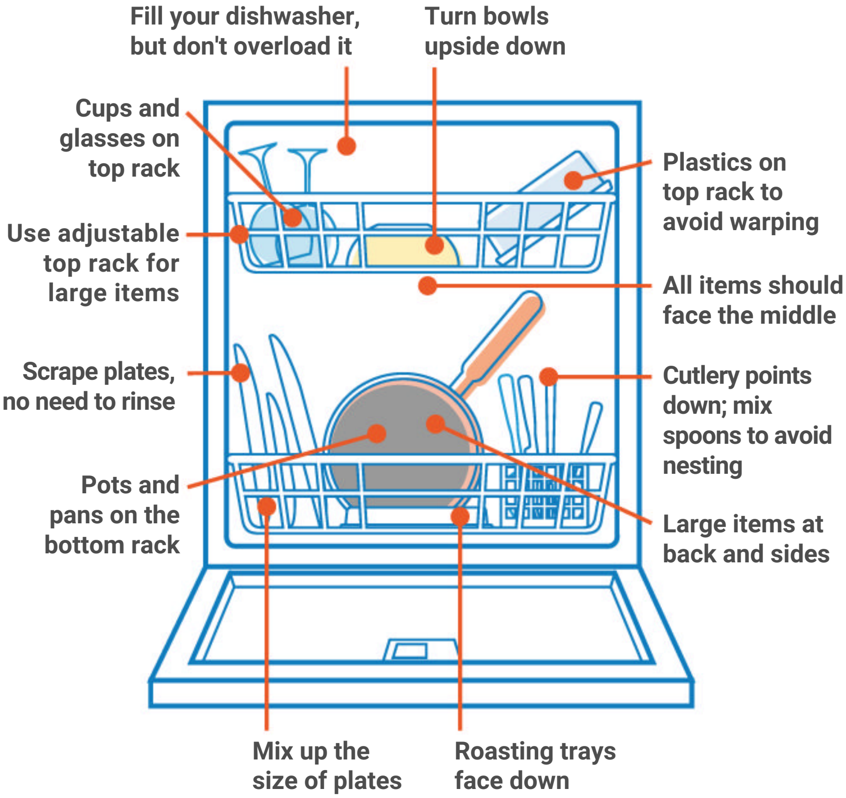
5. USE RINSE AID

If your all-in-one product doesn't already contain rinse aid, add it separately. Rinse aid lowers the surface tension of the water, which means water won't bead on your glassware and it'll come out squeaky clean and dry. When buying rinse aid, the same money-saving rules apply – look at unit pricing, buy larger bottles, switch to home-brand alternatives or stock up when products are on special.

6. KEEP A CLEAN MACHINE

Regularly clean your dishwasher filter to ensure it performs at its best, and check out all our tips on how to clean your dishwasher in *CHOICE* Sep 24.

How to load your dishwasher


Fill your dishwasher, but don't overload it
Turn bowls upside down
Cups and glasses on top rack
Use adjustable top rack for large items
Scrape plates, no need to rinse
Pots and pans on the bottom rack
Plastics on top rack to avoid warping
All items should face the middle
Cutlery points down; mix spoons to avoid nesting
Large items at back and sides
Mix up the size of plates
Roasting trays face down

			COSTS		PERFORMANCE							CLAIMS					
Recommended		Type	Price paid per pack ($)	Cost per wash ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Egg yolk removal score (%)	Rice starch removal score (%)	Baked-on diet cheese removal score (%)	Red wine removal score (%)	Coffee removal score (%)	Minced meat removal score (%)	Biodegradable wrapper	Phosphate-free	Rinse aid	Cruelty-free	Septic-safe	Safe for greywater systems
✓	**Aldi** Logix Platinum Dishwasher Capsules	T	11.99	0.26	76	90	78	93	56	48	91						
✓	**Ecostore** Ultra Power Dishwasher Tablets	T	23.00	0.64	76	91	73	90	60	49	91		✓	✓	✓	✓	
✓	**Finish** Powerball Ultimate All in 1 Tabs Baking Soda	T	43.00	1.26	76	87	75	91	61	54	90	✓				✓	
✓	**Fairy** Platinum Plus 30 Minute Miracle Dishwasher Capsules Lemon	T	47.00	1.52	75	90	77	91	53	53	90			✓			
✓	**Fairy** Platinum Plus 30 Minute Miracle Dishwasher Capsules Fresh Scent	T	50.00	1.47	75	90	76	89	52	54	89			✓			
✓	**Finish** Powerball Quantum All in 1 Tabs	T	32.00	0.44	75	88	77	92	54	49	90	✓				✓	
✓	**Finish** Powerball Ultimate Plus All in 1	T	62.00	1.38	75	88	77	84	60	52	89	✓				✓	
✓	**Finish** Powerball Ultimate Plus Material Care	T	72.00	1.16	75	87	77	89	59	49	89	✓				✓	
✓	**Finish** Powerball Ultimate Material Care All in 1 Tabs	T	58.00	1.12	75	87	75	92	61	49	88	✓				✓	
✓	**Finish** Powerball Ultimate All in 1 Tabs	T	12.00	0.75	75	75	90	66	55	88	75	✓				✓	
	Earth Choice All in 1 Dish Tablets	T	17.80	0.42	74	89	72	87	57	50	91	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Eco Planet Automatic Dishwasher Tablets	T	24.00	0.80	74	90	70	83	57	52	91				✓	✓	✓
	Finish Powerball Ultimate 0% All in 1 Tabs	T	25.00	0.54	74	87	75	91	53	48	89	✓				✓	
	Earth Choice Undo This Mess Dish Tablets	T	20.00	0.42	73	89	78	84	48	48	91		✓	✓		✓	✓
	Woolworths Shine Optimum All in 1 Ultimate Clean Dishwashing Pods	T	13.00	0.29	73	87	77	84	55	48	87						
	Woolworths Shine Ultra 18 in 1 Dishwashing Tablets	T	8.00	0.20	73	88	66	85	59	53	88		✓	✓		✓	✓
	Aldi Logix All In One Dishwasher Tablets	T	6.29	0.14	72	89	71	90	49	42	91	✓	✓			✓	✓
	Coles Ultra Advanced Dishwasher Tablets	T	7.50	0.19	72	91	70	87	52	45	91		✓	✓			
	Fairy All In One Dishwasher Capsules	T	12.50	0.48	72	91	72	84	45	46	92			✓			
	Fairy Platinum Dried-On Soils Dishwasher Capsules	T	56.00	1.08	71	88	71	87	45	46	89			✓			
	Finish Powerball Power All in 1 Tabs	T	23.00	0.38	71	89	69	84	53	42	90	✓				✓	
	Somat Excellence 4in1 Gel Caps	T	35.00	0.78	71	85	73	84	49	47	87	✓					
	Koh Dishwashing Tablets	T	26.90	0.54	69	85	67	85	46	40	88	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
	Coles Optix Titanium Pro Dishwasher Tablets	T	35.00	0.78	68	89	73	88	35	36	91			✓			
	Woolworths Shine Dishwasher Powder Concentrate	P	3.90	0.08	65	68	67	73	55	41	84	na					
	Ecostore Powerful Cleaning Dishwasher Tablets	T	23.00	0.46	64	91	15	79	57	53	91		✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Woolworths Shine 10 in 1 Dishwashing Tablets	T	4.50	0.15	62	73	48	66	53	50	84			✓		✓	✓
	Finish All in 1 Max Fast Dissolving Gel	G	17.50	0.70	59	87	68	84	6	16	90	na				✓	
	Wash Wild Dishwasher Powder	P	14.00	0.21	59	87	66	60	29	26	87	na	✓		✓	✓	✓
	Somat Gold Power Gel	G	16.00	0.64	58	84	78	83	5	12	85	na		✓			
	Ecostore Dishwasher Powder	P	11.00	0.16	56	54	66	66	42	38	73	na	✓		✓	✓	
	Finish Concentrated Powder Classic	P	15.00	0.30	55	88	20	43	53	47	81	na	✓			✓	
	Morning Fresh Pro Brilliance Dishwasher Tabs	T	22.00	1.47	55	66	45	66	35	36	83			✓	✓		

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend dishwasher detergents with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 75%. **Type T** Tablet, **P** Powder. **G** Gel. **Price paid per pack** as of Sep 2024. **Cost per wash** This is based on the price for the pack size tested. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of the stain removal scores, egg yolk, rice starch, baked-on cheese, red wine, coffee and minced meat, weighted equally. **na** Not applicable. ■

IMAGE: GETTY

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING	BRAND	RATING
Aldi	D	Fairy	F
Coles	D	Finish	D
Earth Choice	B	Somat	C
Ecostore	A	Woolworths	C

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

Thrifty sticks

Top performers often cost top dollar, but **Alice Richard** reveals the stick vacs that do a decent job on a budget

For those annoying little messes in life that don't require the heft of a barrel vacuum but do need more than a dustpan and broom, the stick vacuum tidily fills the void.

Some of them don't come cheap, though: a high-end stick vac can cost well over $1000. That's a lot when you consider that, for most homes, you'll also need a regular vacuum for deeper cleans in between the quick whip-arounds with your stick vac. But it is possible to get a great vac for not much cash.

How much should you spend?

With price tags ranging from over $1000 for a top-of-the-line Dyson to less than $100 for some Kmart models, it's worth considering how much you're prepared to pay. After all, not everyone can afford to spend a grand for what is essentially a dirt-sucking stick.

Just bear in mind that as stick vacuum technology has improved, prices have also increased: the median price of stick vacuums we've tested is now $599, up from $299 seven years ago.

It is possible to pick up a cheap stick vacuum that will do a pretty good job, but you need to shop carefully and keep your expectations in check. We've tested many models that come in at significantly lower price points than premium brands, and some are better than others.

Not everyone can afford to spend a grand for what is essentially a dirt-sucking stick

THE DOWNSIDES OF CHEAPER STICK VACS

Almost all of the stick vacuums recommended by our experts cost $800 or more, so if you're on a budget you may need to resign yourself to a lower level of performance: a $250 stick vac won't necessarily deliver the same results as one of our recommended $1000+ models. And if your budget stick vac has a problem or failure, it's often harder and much less cost effective to replace spare parts – if they're even available.

Also, cordless stick vacs have rechargeable batteries, but with cheaper brands these may not be removable, which means you can't replace the battery when it finally dies or stops holding a charge for long – once the battery is dead, the whole appliance becomes unusable. Premium brands are more likely to have removable batteries, which means that when the battery reaches the end of its life you can just buy a new one instead of a whole new vacuum. Plus, you also have the option to buy a second battery to double your vacuuming time.

What to look for

Our testing team thoroughly measures the performance of stick vacs in a range of areas, including ability to suck up pet hair, manoeuvre into corners, and clean both hard floors and carpet.

When buying a stick vac, CHOICE vacuum expert Adrian Lini says to take special note of the cleaning head design and suction power, as many models do a poor job of cleaning carpet.

"Stick vacs in general are best for a quick and efficient house clean," says Lini. "If you only have hard floors, then a cheaper stick vacuum that performed well in our tests would be a satisfactory choice."

Look for a model with a soft or fluffy roller attachment for hard floors: this will provide the best contact with the floor surface to suck up dirt, and will also help prevent damage to hard floors.

BEST STICK VACS UNDER $250

If the convenience of a stick vacuum appeals, but you don't want to part with a lot of cash, check out these six options that represent the best performance for the least money.

74%

Black & Decker PowerSeries Extreme Cordless Stick Vacuum 4in1

Hard floor score: 67%

Running time: 11 min

If you're cleaning up after a furry friend but you're on a budget, this Black & Decker is a great option. It's excellent at removing pet hair and reaching under low furniture. Unfortunately it's not brilliant at other cleaning tasks, with our experts rating it as just 'OK' for cleaning hard floors and quick carpet cleans, and 'very poor' at car cleaning. But it scores pretty well for thorough carpet cleans, which is an area where many other stick vacuums fall down. While it didn't score highly enough to be recommended by our experts, it's the top scorer under $250, so it's a good option if you're looking for a cheaper stick vacuum.

74%

Vax Reach VX92

Hard floor score: 83%

Running time: 15 min

It didn't perform especially well on carpet, but this budget Vax really does the job on hard floors. It's nice and easy to use, too, with our experts noting that it has a very good reach under low furniture, can be used in handheld mode with a long wand to reach high spots, and the bin is nice and easy to empty. It'll give you a respectable 15 minutes' run time on the maximum setting, which is up there with many expensive models, and is even longer than some $1000+ stick vacs. It didn't ace our pet hair cleaning test, which isn't exactly surprising since we conduct it on carpet. But given how well it performs on hard floors, it may well be a winner for carpet-free households with pets.

72%

Black & Decker Smart Tech Pet 2 in 1

Hard floor score: 83%

Running time: 11 min

If you're a pet lover on a tight budget and your home is mostly hard floors, this vacuum is one of the cheapest and best of the budget buys for your needs. It scores an applause-worthy 90% for pet hair removal, and is also good for cleaning the car and hard floors. But with a dismal quick clean score of 45%, you'll be giving yourself a workout trying to get that dirt up from your carpet. It does an adequate job on corners and edges, has good controls and an easy-to-empty bin, but the filter is messy to clean. It runs for 11 minutes at full power, which is pretty standard for stick vacs, but if you have to go over the carpet multiple times to get it clean, that 11 minutes may not get you very far. ▶

IMAGES: BLACK AND DECKER / VAX

71%

Vax SlimVac Pro Plus Cordless Vacuum

Hard floor score: 70%

Running time: 14 min

Easy to clean and simple to use, this Vax model does a good job on hard floors but its performance is somewhat lacklustre on carpet and car cleaning. And while the three Black & Decker models we've profiled aced our pet hair removal test, the SlimVac only managed a score of 60%, so it's not a great buy for pet lovers. A score of 71% is still classed as 'Good' by our experts, so it's worth considering, but may not be suitable for all households.

71%

Airflo 2 in 1 Cordless Stick Vacuum

Hard floor score: 73%

Running time: 20 min

If you have champagne tastes on a beer budget, this Airflo could be for you: it's got Dyson vibes without the Dyson price tag. It scored well on both our pet hair and hard floor tests, and if you're a stickler for a clean car, it'll do a great job. It has a generous runtime, and our experts say it's nice and easy to use. It also comes with a decent range of tools for the price, including a soft roller head that's ideal for hard floors. However, our experts rated it as 'Poor' for quick carpet cleans and not much better for more thorough carpet cleaning. It also only has a one-year warranty (most other stick vacs have two), and once the battery is kaput, that's it – you can't remove and replace it so you'll need to buy a whole new vacuum.

70%

Black & Decker 18V 2-in-1 PowerSeries+ Stick Vacuum Kit

Hard floor score: 63%

Running time: 12 min

Black & Decker certainly is well-represented in the budget category, this being the third stick vac from the brand in the sub-$250 top performers. This model's scores follow a similar pattern to its peers: it's excellent at removing pet hair, but less impressive in the hard floor and carpet tests. However, its scores on these tests are still considered 'OK' by our experts, so it'll get you out of a pickle if you have less than $200 to spend and plenty of pet hair to clean up.

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING
Beko	C
Bissell	C
Black & Decker	C
Bosch	C
Dyson	F
Electrolux	C
Hoover	C
LG	C
Miele	B
Ryobi	C
Samsung	F
Vax	C

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

IMAGES: VAX / AIRFLO / BLACK AND DECKER

			PERFORMANCE									SPECIFICATIONS						
Recommended		Price ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Hard floor dirt pick-up score (%)	Pet hair removal score (%)	Quick cleaning on carpet score (%)	Thorough carpet cleaning score (%)	Car cleaning score (%)	Noise (dBA)	Measured running time (min)	Swappable battery		Claimed charge time (hr)	Measured dust collector (L)	Weight (kg)	Origin	Warranty (yr)
✓	**Dyson** Gen5detect Absolute	1549	87	81	90	100	80	89	90	72	12	✓		3.5	0.5	3.46	Malaysia	2
✓	**Dyson** V15s Detect Submarine Complete	1649	87	82	90	100	76	91	90	75	13	✓		4.5	0.5	3.22	China	2
✓	**Samsung** Bespoke Jet Plus Elite VS20B95993B	1399	86	81	90	100	74	82	80	73	6	✓		3.5	0.5	2.76	Vietnam	2
✓	**Dyson** V12 Detect Slim Absolute	1349	85	81	90	90	79	88	90	73	6	✓		3.5	0.2	2.42	Malaysia	2
✓	**LG** A9X Ultra	1599	85	87	87	100	69	78	90	74	9	✓		4.0	0.4	2.90	Korea	2
✓	**Dyson** Gen5outsize Absolute	1649	84	82	90	100	65	77	90	75	14	✓		4.5	1.6	3.84	Malaysia	2
✓	**Shark** Stratos Cordless Pet Pro Vacuum with Clean Sense IQ IZ400ANZ	800	83	78	90	100	66	73	80	74	10	✓		3.5	0.8	3.88	China	2
✓	**LG** CordZero A9T-Max with All-In-One Tower	1599	82	82	83	90	72	80	90	76	10	✓		4.0	0.4	2.76	Korea	2
✓	**Bosch** Unlimited 7 BCS711WAU	549	80	78	77	90	76	85	90	72	9	✓		ns	0.3	2.96	Germany	(A)
✓	**Shark** Cordless Detect Pro with Auto Empty System IW3611ANZ	800	80	77	90	90	65	70	60	76	10	✓		5.0	0.3	2.84	China	2
	Bosch Unlimited 7 BCS712FCAU	749	79	81	73	100	65	77	90	72	10	✓		1.2	0.3	2.94	Germany	(A)
	Dyson V8	799	79	82	70	90	76	81	80	72	8			5.0	0.3	2.52	Malaysia	2
	Shark Cordless Pro IR300ANZ	500	79	79	90	90	59	63	80	75	11	✓		3.5	0.8	3.28	China	2
	Vax SlimVac Pro Max VSV21Z	349	79	84	77	90	66	73	80	73	16			5.0	0.4	2.34	China	2
	Dyson Cyclone V10	1099	77	82	60	100	72	81	90	76	8	✓		3.5	0.5	2.62	Malaysia	2
	Miele Triflex HX2 Cat and Dog SOML0 HS19	899	77	83	63	90	74	84	90	67	12	✓		4.0	0.3	3.70	Germany	2
	Dyson V11 Advanced	1199	76	82	60	100	72	79	90	73	14	✓		3.5	0.5	2.98	Philippines	2
	Miele Triflex HX2 Pro SOML0	1199	76	83	63	90	68	80	90	69	12	✓		4.0	0.3	3.68	Germany	2
	Ryobi 18V One+ HP Brushless Stick Vacuum Kit R18XSV914	459	76	78	77	100	53	62	90	74	17	✓		2.0	0.6	3.74	China	(B)
	Shark Cordless Vacuum with Self Cleaning Brushroll	400	76	80	80	90	57	63	70	73	12	✓		3.0	0.9	3.40	China	3
	Bissell Pet Hair Eraser Slim Cordless 3-in-1 2907F	399	74	80	80	90	48	54	90	65	16			5.0	0.5	3.74	China	2
	Black & Decker PowerSeries Extreme Cordless Stick Vacuum 4in1 BHFEV182-XE	229	74	78	67	90	66	71	20	77	11	✓		5.0	0.5	3.12	China	2
	Electrolux Well Q7 WQ71-P5OIB	499	74	76	77	90	53	62	80	67	16			4.5	0.3	2.98	China	2
	Vax Reach VX92	179	74	80	83	70	56	60	70	74	15			3.0	0.5	2.96	China	2
	Beko PractiClean 2-in-1 Rechargeable Vacuum Cleaner VRT 82821 BV	399	73	81	63	90	62	68	90	72	13	✓		3–4	0.4	2.44	China	1
	Electrolux Ergorapido Allergy ZB3515ST	499	73	77	73	90	55	62	80	69	15			4.0	0.3	2.46	China	2
	Black & Decker Smarttech Pet 2 in 1 FEJ520JFSX-XE	185	72	74	83	90	45	51	80	79	11			6.0	0.6	2.47	China	2
	Airflo 2 in 1 Cordless Stick Vacuum AFV6062	249	71	81	73	90	42	48	80	71	20			4.0	0.5	2.22	China	1
	Hoover Emerge Pet+ Cordless Vacuum F180PSV231	699	71	79	87	40	60	65	80	76	12	✓		3.0	0.4	3.68	Vietnam	3
	Invictus X9 plus X-Water 2.0	1240	71	82	83	60	49	54	80	75	10	✓		2–3	0.5	2.68	China	1
	Vax SlimVac Pro Plus Cordless Vacuum VSV21X	249	71	83	70	60	63	67	50	70	14			5.0	0.4	2.34	China	2
	Black & Decker 18V 2-in-1 PowerSeries+ Stick Vacuum Kit BHFEA18D-XE	199	70	75	63	90	59	63	80	77	12	✓		5.0	0.4	2.76	China	2

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend stick vacs with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 80%, as long as they also score at least 70% for hard floor dirt pick-up. **Price** RRP as of October 2024. We have tested more models but these are the top rated. **CHOICE Expert Rating** consists of ease of use (30%), hard floor dirt pick-up (30%), pet hair removal (15%), quick carpet clean (15%) and thorough carpet clean (10%). Car cleaning score is not included in the CHOICE Expert Rating as not all models separate into a handheld vac. **Swappable battery** means the battery is easily removable without tools and can be swapped for a fully charged one (if supplied or purchased as optional extra). **(A)** 2 years (10 years for motor). **(B)** 4 years (6 if registered), 3 years for battery and charger. **ns** Not stated. ■

TV On Demand
Sport
Athletics
Cycling
Swimming
Rowing
Cooking
Travel
Culture
Family
Music

Set a screen

’Tis the season for watching summer sports. **Alice Richard** and **Denis Gallagher** help you find a match-fit TV

Summer brings a jam-packed few months of sport – including top-ranking tennis stars on court at the Australian Open, and hours and hours of slow summer cricket, including test and one day international matches.

If you’re a sports lover, as so many Australians are, you may be in search of a screen that’s going to deliver all the live action in its full vibrant glory. When it comes to how well TVs perform for watching sport, CHOICE experts have found there are some star players you can rely on, and some you want to leave on the bench.

And with the upcoming sales season the perfect time to pick up a bargain, it helps to be able to tell the winners from the losers. Factors such as picture clarity, processor speed and colour balance can be the difference between feeling like you’re in the front row or stuck up the back trying to figure out who’s got the ball.

Our experts test models specifically for sport as part of our comprehensive TV reviews, scoring every model for sports in both standard definition (SD) and high definition (HD) as part of our assessment of various content, which also includes DVD and Blu-ray movies and broadcast SD and HD TV series.

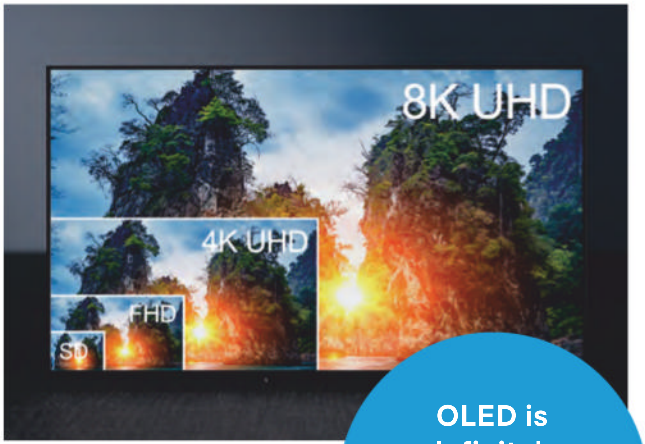
> **There are some star players you can rely on, and some you want to leave on the bench**

A sports-lover's guide to buying a TV

1 KNOW YOUR SOURCE

Before buying a new box, you need to know the broadcast quality of your favourite sports. Are they shown in SD (720 x 576 pixels), HD (1920 x 1080) or ultra-high definition (UHD), aka 4K (3860 x 2160)? The answer will vary depending on the sport, the channel and the state you live in (for example, free-to-air AFL games are often shown in HD in Victoria and SD in NSW).

If you're watching an SD broadcast on an HD TV, it needs to upscale the video to display at the higher resolution. How well it bridges this gap depends heavily on the quality of the unit and its internal processors. This can vary notably between models and definitions, which is why we score separately for SD and HD sources.



OLED is definitely the MVP (i.e. the best choice) for watching sport

2 OLED OR LCD?

According to our experts, OLED is definitely the MVP (i.e. the best choice) here, particularly if you can control the ambient light in your TV room. But OLED TVs are usually more expensive, so it will depend on your budget.

What's the difference? Well, LCD (liquid-crystal display) TVs require a light source behind their screen panel, meaning they can go very dark grey but never full black. By comparison, OLED (organic light emitting diode) screens have lights integrated within each diode and they can simply turn off when required, giving you true blacks.

3 WHAT SIZE TV DO YOU NEED?

Bigger is always better, right? Not always with TVs, because it also depends on your room size and how close you like to be to the TV when you watch. If you sit too close to a massive screen, you may be able to see the pixels – and that's not pretty.

There are three important factors you need to consider for the best viewing experience:

1. Your TV's screen resolution (HD or 4K)
2. The size of your room
3. How far you sit from the screen. ▶

IMAGE: GETTY | WWW.LG.COM/UK/LG-EXPERIENCE-TEST/LG-LAB/MINI-LED-VS-OLED/

4 TEST THE TV INSTORE

Retailers usually play animated movies on instore TVs because they look amazing. Sport is a completely different ball game, so switch to a match or race to truly test their mettle. If that's not possible, you could take in your own sports DVD to test.

Evaluate key specs such as picture clarity (are the numbers on jerseys sharp?), motion and colour balance (do skin tones look right?). Cycle through picture modes and note nasties such as judder (lack of smooth panning), motion blur (trailing elements behind fast-moving objects) and odd saturation.

Store TVs are often muted too, so turn the volume up if you can and study the sound. Is it rich or tinny? How do commentators' voices sound? If it's ordinary, you might need to buy an accompanying soundbar (see our soundbar reviews on p62).

5 CHECK THE SCREEN ANGLE

Got friends coming round regularly for the footy? Then you'll want to test the screen angle and ensure they'll all be able to see well.

As you move sideways from the centre of the screen, most TVs will lose some colour and contrast.

Stand in the middle of the screen at your normal viewing distance and then take a few steps sideways. If the picture degrades too much, keep moving till you find a screen that does a better job. Your friends will thank you.

Take a few steps sideways. If the picture degrades too much, find a screen that does a better job

Shop Ethical rating

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

BRAND	RATING
Hisense	C
Hubbl (Foxtel)	F
LG	D
Samsung	F
Sony	C
TCL	F

				PERFORMANCE													SPECIFICATIONS							
Recommended		Type	Price ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	HD picture quality score (%)	SD picture quality score (%)	Filmmaker mode score (%)	User interface score (%)	Remote control score (%)	Smart TV score (%)	4K/UHD score (%)	Energy use score (%)	EPG score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Voice assistant score (%)	Sport score (%)	Size (cm)	Size (in)	HDMI inputs	HDMI 2.1 support	USB 2 inputs (rear)	Point and click style remote	Record TV shows to USB	Weight with stand (kg)
✓	**LG** OLED42C4PSA	O	2195	84	83	84	90	93	71	93	85	70	80	80	92	85	106	42	4	✓	3	✓	✓	10.1
✓	**LG** OLED55B4PSA	O	2495	82	83	75	90	93	71	93	85	75	80	60	92	85	139	55	4	✓	2	✓	✓	14.5
✓	**LG** OLED65G4PSA	O	4495	82	78	84	90	93	71	93	85	71	80	70	82	85	165	65	4	✓	3	✓	✓	29.1
✓	**LG** OLED65C4PSA	O	3495	81	73	79	90	93	71	93	85	75	80	75	92	85	164	65	4	✓	3	✓	✓	18.5
✓	**Hisense** 65U7NAU	L	1495	79	83	75	80	95	59	88	80	75	70	65	66	80	164	65	4	✓	1		✓	20.8
✓	**Sony** XR65X90L	L	1995	79	74	82	85	87	60	93	85	71	80	70	82	78	164	65	4	✓	1			25.0
	LG 43UT8050PSB	L	895	78	69	76	85	93	71	95	85	70	80	70	92	78	108	43	3		2	✓	✓	8.9
	LG 65QNED81TSA	L	1895	78	69	78	85	93	71	93	85	78	80	50	92	78	164	65	3		2	✓	✓	26.3
✓	**Samsung** QA50QN90CAWXXY	L	1988	78	78	73	85	93	57	90	80	70	70	80	72	80	125	49	4	✓	2		✓	17.6
✓	**Samsung** UA32T5300AWXXY	L	595	77	76	79	na	87	80	93	na	78	70	30	na	80	81	32	2		1			4.1
✓	**Sony** K65XR70	L	3495	77	77	83	85	85	60	95	85	67	40	70	92	83	164	65	4	✓	1			28.3
	LG 65QNED86TSA	L	1995	76	65	69	85	93	71	93	80	76	80	60	90	75	164	65	4		2	✓	✓	26.3
	LG 65UT8050PSB	L	1495	76	63	72	85	93	71	93	80	76	80	65	90	70	164	65	3		2	✓	✓	21.7
	Samsung QA55S90DAWXXY	O	2795	76	75	69	90	93	56	88	70	70	60	80	61	80	140	55	4	✓	2		✓	17.3
	Samsung UA43DU7700WXXY	L	795	76	69	83	85	92	56	88	85	71	60	70	61	80	108	43	3		1			7.4
	Hubbl TVPFX065OCB	L	1595	75	68	78	80	87	66	78	80	90	60	75	49	80	165	65	3	✓	0			35.0
	LG 65QNED91TSA	L	2995	75	65	63	85	93	71	93	80	75	80	75	82	75	165	65	4	✓	2	✓	✓	35.0
	TCL 65C755	L	1695	75	69	67	85	87	69	95	80	76	55	65	92	80	165	65	4	✓	1			22.1
	Hisense 65UXAU	L	2995	74	62	76	85	95	59	88	80	70	70	70	66	75	165	65	4	✓	1		✓	35.9
	Samsung QA55LS03DAWXXY	L	1495	74	72	66	85	93	55	88	75	68	70	60	61	78	138	54	4	✓	2		✓	17.3
	Sony K65XR80	O	4495	74	69	78	85	73	61	95	80	76	40	80	90	80	164	65	4	✓	1			23.2
	Samsung UA65DU7700WXXY	L	1295	73	64	73	80	88	56	88	80	77	60	70	61	70	164	65	3		1			16.4
	TCL 65C655	L	895	73	64	69	80	80	69	95	75	76	55	70	90	73	165	65	3		0		✓	17.4
	Sony K65S30	L	1695	72	60	80	85	88	60	95	80	72	50	45	92	73	164	65	4		1			28.3
	Sony KD65X77L	L	1395	72	67	59	85	87	60	95	75	72	60	60	84	63	164	65	3		2			20.7
	Sony KD75X77L	L	1499	72	67	59	85	87	60	95	75	68	60	75	84	63	189	74	3		2			31.7
	Samsung QA65S95DAWXXY	O	4995	71	63	65	90	92	56	88	75	70	60	55	61	75	163	64	4	✓	3		✓	29.0
	Bauhn (Aldi, with WebOS) ATV55UHDW-0124	L	479	70	57	63	75	87	73	88	75	80	70	55	82	68	140	55	3		2	✓	✓	9.8
	Hisense 65U6NAU	L	1395	70	60	54	80	95	61	93	80	77	70	60	66	53	164	65	3		2		✓	19.1
	Kogan KAQLED65XQ98JSTA	L	829	69	51	66	80	88	71	95	70	70	60	65	76	75	165	65	4		2		✓	24.7
	Samsung QA65QN85DBWXXY	L	2995	69	58	62	80	92	56	88	70	74	60	65	61	78	165	65	4	✓	2		✓	26.8
	Samsung QA65Q60DAWXXY	L	1895	67	52	59	70	93	56	88	70	83	70	65	61	55	163	64	3		2			21.8

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend models with a CHOICE Expert Rating of 75% or more and at least 70% for SD and HD picture quality. **Type O** OLED, **L** LCD. **Price** RRP as supplied by manufacturers, or indicative price found online or instore as of November 2024. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of HD picture quality (25%), SD picture quality (15%), filmmaker mode picture score (10%), 4K/UHD picture quality (5%), user interface (10%), remote control (10%), smart TV (10%), energy use (5%), EPG (electronic program guide) (5%) and sound quality (5%). **Energy use score** is based on 10 hours in use and 14 hours in standby mode for 365 days at 40c per KWh. **Voice assistant score** is not included in the CHOICE Expert Rating and the Sport score is part of the HD and SD picture quality score. **na** Not applicable. All Sony TVs are made in Malaysia except the XR65X90L, KD-65X77L and KD-75X77L which are made in Vietnam. Hisense, TCL, Bauhn and Kogan TVs are made in China. All Samsung TVs are made in Vietnam. The Hubbl TV is made in Poland. All LG TVs are made in Indonesia. LG, Samsung, Hubbl and Sony offer the standard one-year warranty; Hisense and TCL offer three years. ■

Sound check

Your soundbar may be capable of more than you realise.
Peter Zaluzny shares some ideas

Home entertainment tech – much like TVs, games consoles and Bluetooth speakers – tends to be a plug and play affair. You open the box, take the stuff out, follow the quick start guide and you're good to go.

But the default settings rarely deliver the best possible performance, especially when it comes to soundbars.

Have a play in the settings and look for some of the features listed here in your soundbar. You may not find all these features in one model, but you'll definitely find something that can enhance your home entertainment experience.

> **The default settings rarely deliver the best possible performance**

Control your soundbar with the TV remote

There's a useful technology that has been adopted by all the major manufacturers called Consumer Electronics Control – or CEC for short. You can use it to control your soundbar using your TV remote, even if they are made by different brands. Though it's limited to basic controls such as volume or switching through audio modes, CEC saves you the trouble of constantly having to switch remotes.

CEC is deactivated by default on most TVs. You can activate it in the settings, but for some reason, most TV brands give CEC a different name (except for Hisense). The major manufacturers call it:

- **LG:** Simplink
- **Samsung:** Anynet+
- **Sony:** BRAVIA Sync/Bravia Link or CONTROL for HDMI
- **TCL:** Control Other Devices

The CEC settings will be in a different location depending on the brand and operating system that your TV is running. For example, to turn on CEC on LG TVs running WebOS 22, go to All Setting > General (cog icon) > Devices > HDMI Settings and turn on SIMPLINK (HDMI-CEC). You may also need to activate it on your soundbar.

Explore the different audio modes

It's worth cycling through the sound settings on your soundbar. The different presets adjust the equaliser (EQ for short) to suit the content (e.g. music, movies, gaming).

The remote or associated app will have a dedicated 'sound mode' or 'EQ' button. Some higher-end soundbars may have a 'custom EQ' slot so you can manually adjust the audio frequencies to your liking.

Use voice control on smart devices

If your soundbar can connect to the internet and has built-in support for digital assistants such as Google Home or Alexa, you can probably use it to control other smart devices in your home. Instead of spending money on a smart speaker or reaching for your phone, you can just tell your soundbar "Hey Google, turn off the bedroom lights" or "Alexa, change the TV to Channel 10". The microphone is usually in the remote, though a few fancy models have one built into the soundbar.

This feature is usually turned off by default for privacy reasons. You can activate it in the settings and log into your Google Home or Alexa account, usually in the associated app.

Unfortunately, there's no guarantee that the soundbar will work with all the smart devices in your home. But if they can already communicate with Google Home or Alexa via your smartphone, then the soundbar should be fine.

Use automatic room calibration

Some soundbars can assess the size of your room then adjust the volume and equaliser to deliver the best possible audio quality. They can also accommodate objects like furniture and other materials that may affect the sound, such as echoing caused by windows or tiles.

This either takes place in the soundbar using a built-in/detachable microphone, or through your smartphone via an app. The process only takes a few minutes and can make a huge difference. Check the table on p64 to find the models that support automatic room calibration.

Play music without the TV on

We tend to associate soundbars with shows and movies, so it's easy to forget that they also can function independently of the TV. Most have at least one way to connect, the most common being Bluetooth or the good old AUX port (physical cable).

Some soundbars can assess the room size and adjust to deliver the best audio quality

It's also not uncommon for soundbars to support casting from Android devices and Wi-Fi direct. Some also offer Apple AirPlay, but this isn't as common. All three options can deliver higher quality audio streaming compared to Bluetooth.

A couple of brands, such as Sonos, can even integrate their soundbars into a home speaker network. This feature, which is sometimes called 'party mode', can play the same audio from a single source (such as a smartphone) across a series of speakers on the same internet connection.

Note that you'll need to turn off CEC if you want to use your soundbar independently of the TV. The soundbar will tell the TV to turn on and off if CEC is active and vice versa.

Connect other devices to the soundbar

Though soundbars are only designed for audio, some models come with one or two additional HDMI inputs. These support just about any device with HDMI and can actually improve sound quality.

Say you connect your Xbox or PlayStation to the HDMI input in your soundbar. The soundbar grabs and decodes the audio then sends the video signal to the TV. This process is called 'passthrough' and can improve audio quality, depending on the age of your TV.

Older TVs that don't have HDMI ARC or eARC rely on other connections for the soundbar, such as Optical (aka TOSLINK), RCA (red and white stereo inputs) or even Bluetooth. These may not be able to decode certain formats or they could compress quality due to limited bandwidth.

So, if you're going from games console to TV to soundbar, you may not be getting the best audio output. But an HDMI-enabled device plugged directly into the soundbar will provide the best possible audio that your equipment is capable of, before passing the video signal through to the TV.

CHOICE tip: The extra HDMI ports on your soundbar can be a lifesaver if you've run out of inputs on your TV and want to plug in more devices. ▶

		COSTS		PERFORMANCE							SPECIFICATIONS									
Recommended		Price ($)	Annual standby running cost ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Voice quality score (%)	Music quality score (%)	Multi-channel listening score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Remote score (%)	Standby energy score (%)	Wi-Fi	Automatic room calibration	Dolby Atmos	DTS-X	HDMI inputs	Multi-channel claim	Number of internal speakers	Soundbar dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Soundbar weight (kg)	Country of origin
✓	**Polk** Signa S2	449	1.90	85	97	93	97	58	60	80					1	2.1	4	5.5 x 90 x 8.5	1.8	China
✓	**Yamaha** SR-B40A	599	3.40	80	87	78	83	77	90	40			✓		1	ns	6	7 x 91 x 14	2.9	Vietnam
✓	**Polk** MagniFi Max AX	1299	6.50	79	93	77	90	75	60	0	✓		✓	✓	3	5.1.2	11	7.5 x 114.5 x 12	5.9	China
✓	**Bose** Smart Soundbar 300	645	8.70	78	83	90	93	61	50	0	✓				1	5.1	5	6 x 69.5 x 10.5	3.2	Malaysia
✓	**JBL** Bar 5.0 MultiBeam	549	5.20	78	80	78	90	79	60	20	✓	✓	✓		1	5	5	6 x 71 x 10.5	2.8	China
✓	**LG** Q Series S70TY	699	2.10	78	90	77	77	71	80	60			✓	✓	1	3.1.1	6	6.5 x 95 x 10.5	3	China
✓	**LG** SN5Y	399	4.10	77	90	85	80	70	50	40				✓	1	2.1	4	6 x 89.5 x 9	2.4	China
✓	**Polk** MagniFi Max AX SR	1499	8.70	77	93	78	87	69	60	0	✓		✓	✓	3	7.1.2	11	7.5 x 114.5 x 12	5.9	China
✓	**LG** S40T	349	2.50	76	73	73	83	72	80	60					0	2.1	2	6.5 x 72 x 6.5	2	China
✓	**LG** S95TR	1699	12.40	76	83	83	83	70	80	0	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	9.1.5	8	6.5 x 125 x 13.5	6	China
✓	**Denon** DHT-S217	399	4.30	75	73	82	83	66	60	40			✓		2	2.1	6	6 x 89 x 12	3.4	China
✓	**Hisense** HS2100	249	2.00	75	80	73	80	68	60	80				✓	1	2.1	2	6.5 x 80.5 x 9.5	1.5	China
✓	**Hisense** U5120G	595	2.90	75	73	72	87	78	50	40			✓	✓	2	5.1.2	11	7.5 x 120.5 x 11.5	5	China
✓	**Samsung** Q930D Q-Series	1499	12.80	75	80	78	87	67	80	0	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	9.1.4	12	6 x 111 x 12	5.5	Vietnam
	Bose Smart Ultra Soundbar White	1499	4.50	74	87	68	77	73	80	20	✓	✓	✓		1	ns	9	6 x 105 x 11	5.8	Malaysia
	Denon DHT-S316	499	1.90	74	85	83	73	65	30	80					1	ns	ns	5.5 x 90 x 8.5	1.8	China
	LG SH7Q	799	4.20	74	73	68	83	76	80	40				✓	1	5.1	5	10.5 x 120.5 x 15	8.6	China
	Samsung B750D B-Series	699	5.20	74	83	75	83	67	60	20				✓	1	5.1	5	6 x 103 x 10.5	3.5	Vietnam
	Samsung HW-B650	599	6.80	74	87	80	80	69	50	0					1	5.1	7	6 x 103.5 x 11	3.1	Vietnam
	Sony HT-A5000	1399	5.10	74	77	80	77	77	60	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	5.1.2	9	7 x 121.5 x 14.5	6	China
	Yamaha True X Bar 50A with External Subwoofer	1299	10.40	74	77	73	83	77	70	0	✓		✓		1	ns	6	6.5 x 101.5 x 11	4	China
	Klipsch Cinema 400	585	6.10	73	80	75	87	68	60	0					1	2.1	4	8 x 102 x 9	2.9	China
	Monster MT-SB512DA	699	3.10	73	83	77	73	69	70	40			✓		1	5.1.2	ns	8.5 x 96.5 x 11.5	3.4	China
	Sony Bravia Theatre Bar 8	1499	5.30	73	83	82	77	60	80	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	5.0.2	11	6.5 x 110 x 10.5	5	Malaysia
	Sony Bravia Theatre Bar 9	1799	5.30	73	83	83	77	60	80	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	7.0.2	13	6.5 x 130 x 10.5	5.5	Malaysia
	Yamaha True X System	1599	14.10	73	77	73	83	73	70	0	✓		✓		1	ns	6	6.5 x 101.5 x 11	4	China
	Bose Smart Soundbar 900	1399	4.00	72	83	77	87	50	50	40	✓	✓	✓		1	ns	9	6 x 104.5 x 11	5.8	Malaysia
	Samsung HW-C450	349	10.30	72	80	77	80	70	50	0				✓	0	2.1	2	6 x 86 x 8	1.4	China
	Samsung HW-Q600C	799	8.10	72	80	80	80	69	50	0			✓	✓	1	3.1.2	8	6 X 103 x 11	3.8	Vietnam
	Sony HT-G700	699	3.70	72	73	66	88	70	50	40			✓	✓	1	7.1.2	3	6.5 x 98.5 x 12	3.3	China

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend soundbars with a CHOICE Expert Rating of 75% and above. **Price** Suggested by manufacturers as of October 2024. **Annual standby energy cost** Based on 40c/kWh with the soundbar in standby mode for 19 hours per day. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of music quality (30%), multichannel sound quality (30%), voice quality (10%), ease of use (20%), remote control (5%) and standby energy (5%). **ns** Not stated. All models in the table support Bluetooth for audio playback using a smart device, and all have ARC support using an HDMI connection except the Samsung HW-C450. All come with a wall mount except the Bose Smart Soundbar 900 and LG S40T. ■

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING
Bose	D
Denon	D
Hisense	F
JBL	F
LG	C
Polk	D
Samsung	F
Sony	C
Yamaha	C

THE SUMMER ISSUE

Super cells

Looking to upgrade your phone ahead of the holidays? **Denis Gallagher** and **Peter Zaluzny** help you decide which models will make the best travel companion

Lost without your smartphone? A dying phone battery can be all sorts of stressful, especially if you're counting on it to stay connected – and especially while travelling. So if you're in the market for a new phone, and you have plans to travel over the summer break, good battery life is one factor that should rate high on your priority list.

Other factors you'll want to carefully consider when buying a smartphone that you intend to take on the road, to the beach or abroad include GPS performance, durability and camera performance.

Use the tables (p67–68) to compare these criteria and more across the latest premium smartphones. And read on for our advice for getting more out of your smartphone on holidays.

Power moves

If you're in the habit of plugging your phone in even when it has plenty of charge left, you could be doing damage to your battery life. Trickle charging after your phone is fully charged is a waste of money, and also reduces the life of the battery.

Don't be obsessed with keeping your phone at 100% all the time, as most performance testing considers 80% to be the best capacity as far as usability is concerned.

A dying battery can be all sorts of stressful – especially while travelling

Most people own their mobile for two to three years before upgrading and you can expect your battery to last without incident over this time. However, the battery performance – how long it lasts before a recharge – will worsen after a year or so of use.

If you like your mobile and don't want to get the latest and greatest model, you may want to consider a power bank for those days of heavy use.

CHOICE tip: If poor battery life is the only issue with your iPhone, it's easy and affordable to get a new battery. If you have any model from the iPhone 7 to the iPhone 16, you can get one installed directly from Apple for under $170 (support.apple.com/en-au/iphone/repair/battery-replacement). But it's worth noting that only models from ▶

IMAGE: GETTY

the iPhone 12 onwards support 5G – you may not want to invest in a 4G model that may not be supported for many years to come.

In the picture

These days, most people are using their phones to capture their holiday memories rather than using a dedicated camera, so the quality of your smartphone's camera (or cameras) is important.

Picture and video capture quality is not just determined by your smartphone's resolution, but also the ability to deliver a good image in different lighting situations. The main camera score in our table covers how well the phone performs as a digital camera in day and night conditions. An LED flash can also be very useful when you're taking a photo with a phone, especially when the available light isn't very good.

Almost all smartphones now have a front-facing camera, which makes snapping a selfie in front of Uluru or the Twelve Apostles considerably easier. The selfie camera score in our table focuses on the performance of the front lens embedded in the screen rather than the main camera.

Water and dust resistance

Water and tech don't usually mix. If your holidays tend to involve lying by the pool or ocean, make sure your phone has an adequate ingress protection (IP) rating. An IP rating is the best way to identify whether a smartphone is dust and water resistant. The first digit applies to particulate protection (dirt, dust etc.) and the second refers to moisture protection.

What's new

A year just wouldn't feel whole without a batch of new phones from Apple and Google. In 2024, Apple released four versions of the iPhone 16 – Standard, Plus, Pro and Max – while Google put out three Pixel 9 phones – Standard, Pro and XL.

GOOGLE

Google is pushing technical performance to the absolute limits in all three phones, which are powered by the proprietary Google Tensor G4 motherboard. Touchscreen response feels fast and fluid, but the battery lasts only as long as the Pixel 8, despite the slightly larger capacity. This was a hefty battery to begin with, so that's not a major shortcoming.

Camera performance ranges from good to very good, with vivid colours and great contrast to help your pictures pop. Google has added a 48-megapixel ultrawide lens to the standard model, but the telephoto lens is only available on the Pro and XL. As with all Google Pixel smartphones, if you want the latest and greatest OS updates, Pixel is your best bet as the range gets Android updates before any other brand.

Google also released the Pixel 9 Pro Fold, which folds in half using a clamshell-like design. We are still testing this model, as it's relatively unique compared to other devices.

APPLE

Apple has updated its smartphone operating system, offering more customisation of the interface and easier access to settings and apps. Included is an 'action' button providing instant access to various camera functions, saving you from digging into the settings. You can also allocate other functions to this button, such as the instant translation feature available with iOS17, which operates in a similar way to Google Translate.

Performance is fast, smooth and responsive, particularly the USB 3 transfer performance on the Pro models (although you do need to buy a cable to support these speeds). The OLED screen is bright enough to view in direct sunlight with max brightness levels over 1000 nits across the range. Though they're still a powerhouse series of smartphones, overall performance is similar to the previous generation of iPhones, including battery life which is also good.

Overall image quality is very good across the whole range. It's worth noting that the ultra-wide lens on the iPhone Pro has had a megapixel increase from 12 to 48, which should resolve some softness and allow for cropping without losing detail on wide shots.

Generally speaking, the higher the number the greater the level of protection – though not always when it comes to moisture protection. Some ratings refer to directed water such as spray, rain or jets, while others protect against submersion. We suggest looking for a smartphone with a rating of IP66 or IP67. IP66 claims to provide complete protection against dust and powerful water jets. IP67 is the same for dust but protects against submersion in water for up to 30 minutes at a depth of up to one metre. (An IP67 model may be fine in the shower, but this can't be guaranteed.)

Some products use generic terms like 'splash-proof'' or 'shower-proof', but these are relatively meaningless without an IP rating. A few manufacturers also sell protective casing or bags if you want an extra level of water and dust resistance. ▶

> **We suggest looking for a smartphone with a rating of IP66 or IP67**

ANDROID PHONES			PERFORMANCE											SPECIFICATIONS						
Recommended		Price ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Performance score (%)	Display score (%)	Battery life score (%)	Main camera score (%)	Selfie camera quality score (%)	Calling sound quality score (%)	GPS score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Durability score (%)	Privacy and security score (%)	Display size (in)	Available internal memory (GB)	Battery capacity (mAh)	Time in use with 15 min charge (hr)	Maximum main camera resolution (MP)*	Dust and water resistance rating	Weight (g)
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S24 Ultra (1TB)	2799	85	90	87	73	81	74	82	100	90	89	86	6.8	1014	5000	12	200	IP68	235
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S24 Ultra (512GB)	2399	85	90	87	73	81	74	82	100	90	89	86	6.8	502	5000	12	200	IP68	235
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S24 Ultra (256GB)	1997	84	86	87	73	81	74	82	100	90	89	86	6.8	227	5000	12	200	IP68	235
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S24 Plus (512GB)	1749	82	90	87	66	77	74	81	80	82	82	84	6.7	502	4900	8	50	IP68	196
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S23 Ultra (1TB)	2349	81	84	86	71	83	73	78	80	86	82	85	6.8	1014	5000	10	200	IP68	238
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S23 Ultra (512GB)	1949	81	84	86	71	83	73	78	80	86	82	85	6.8	450	5000	10	200	IP68	238
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S24 Plus (256GB)	1549	81	86	87	66	77	74	81	80	82	82	84	6.7	229	4900	8	50	IP68	196
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S23 Ultra (256GB)	1649	80	78	86	71	83	73	78	80	86	82	85	6.8	212	5000	10	200	IP68	238
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S23 Plus (256GB)	1399	79	78	83	67	76	73	78	80	87	82	85	6.6	213	4700	10	50	IP68	200
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S23 Plus (512GB)	1599	79	82	83	67	76	73	78	80	87	82	85	6.6	502	4700	10	50	IP68	200
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S24 (256GB)	1299	79	84	83	52	78	74	81	80	88	82	84	6.2	246	4000	8	50	IP68	166
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S23 (256GB)	1199	78	78	83	60	76	73	79	80	87	82	85	6.1	214	3900	7	50	IP68	170
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy Z Fold5 (256GB)	2599	78	81	78	56	76	68	79	90	88	79	87	7.6	213	4400	8	50	IPX8	257
✓	**Google** Pixel 8 Pro (128GB)	1699	77	74	80	52	81	74	70	90	85	80	91	6.7	107	5050	5	50	IP68	213
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S22 Ultra (256GB)	1949	77	75	86	53	80	74	81	80	83	81	84	6.8	217	5000	5	108	IP68	228
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S23 (128GB)	937	77	74	83	60	76	73	79	80	87	82	85	6.1	95	3900	7	50	IP68	170
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S22 (256GB)	1099	76	72	83	46	74	74	84	80	84	82	84	6.1	246	3700	5	50	IP68	169
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy S22 Plus (256GB)	1349	76	72	83	54	73	74	87	80	85	82	84	6.6	246	4500	5	50	IP68	194
✓	**Samsung** Galaxy Z Flip5 (256GB)	1649	76	78	77	50	77	68	80	90	85	76	87	6.7	211	3700	6	12	IPX8	188
✓	**Google** Pixel 8a (256GB)	949	75	76	80	49	79	64	65	80	85	74	91	6.1	246	4492	5	64	IP67	189

IMAGE: GETTY

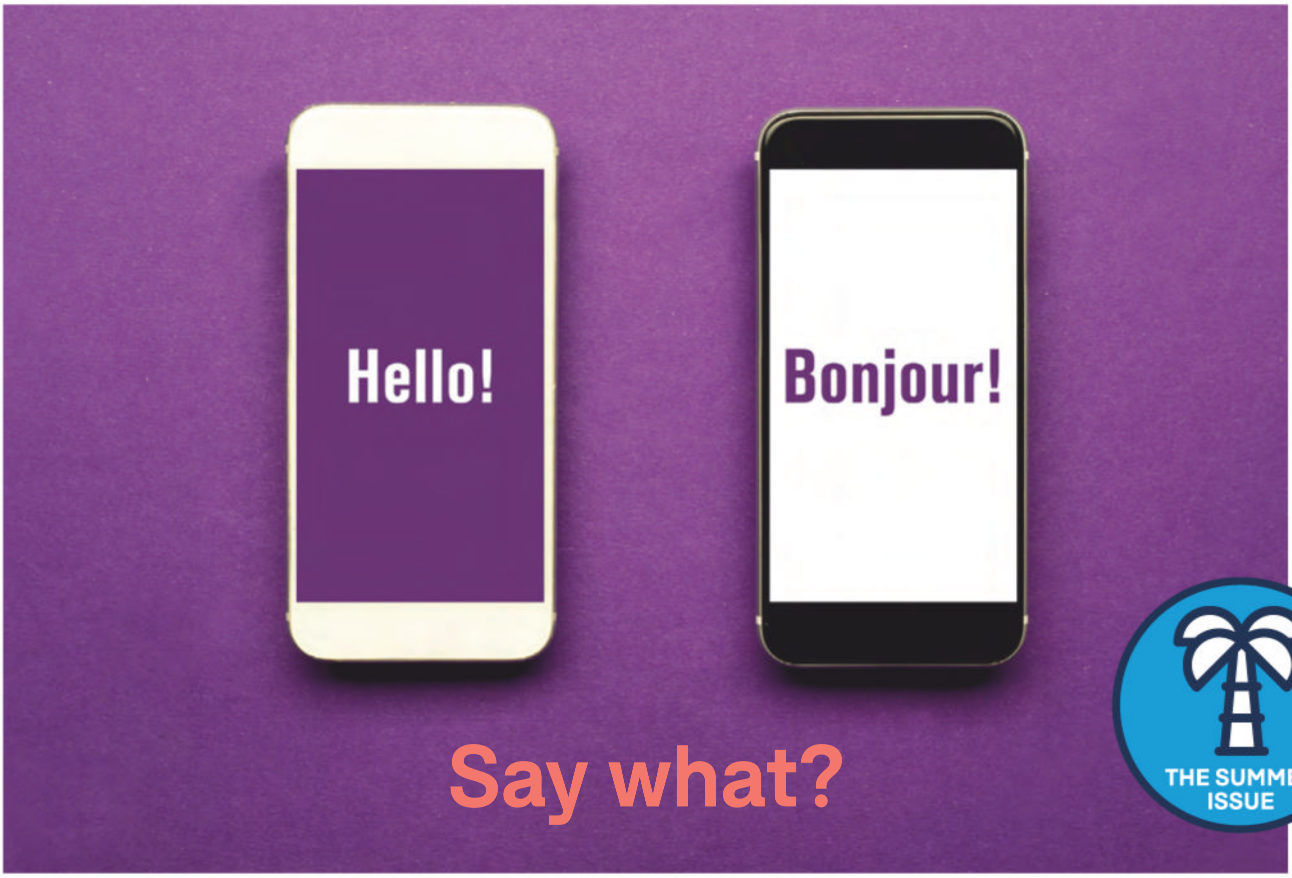
APPLE PHONES			PERFORMANCE											SPECIFICATIONS						
Recommended		Price ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Performance score (%)	Display score (%)	Battery life score (%)	Main camera score (%)	Selfie camera quality score (%)	Calling sound quality score (%)	GPS score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Durability score (%)	Privacy and security score (%)	Display size (in)	Available internal memory (GB)	Battery capacity (mAh)	Time in use with 15 min charge (hr)	Maximum main camera resolution (MP)*	Dust and water resistance rating	Weight (g)
✓	**Apple** iPhone 15 Pro Max (512GB)	2549	83	91	84	73	83	74	76	80	80	94	91	6.7	504	4441	9	48	IP68	223
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 Pro Max (1TB)	2769	81	87	84	71	79	75	68	90	81	88	91	6.7	1016	4323	9	48	IP68	242
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 Pro Max (256GB)	2099	81	83	84	71	79	75	68	90	81	88	91	6.7	248	4323	9	48	IP68	242
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 Pro Max (512GB)	2419	81	87	84	71	79	75	68	90	81	88	91	6.7	504	4323	9	48	IP68	242
✓	**Apple** iPhone 15 Pro (512GB)	2399	81	91	84	62	80	74	77	80	80	94	91	6.1	504	3274	8	48	IP68	190
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 Pro (1TB)	2599	80	87	83	61	79	75	67	90	81	88	91	6.1	1016	3200	8	48	IP68	207
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 Pro (256GB)	1899	80	83	83	61	79	75	67	90	81	88	91	6.1	248	3200	8	48	IP68	207
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 Pro (512GB)	2249	80	87	83	61	79	75	67	90	81	88	91	6.1	504	3200	8	48	IP68	207
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 Pro Max (128GB)	1899	80	79	84	71	79	75	68	90	81	88	91	6.7	110	4323	9	48	IP68	242
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 Pro (128GB)	1749	79	79	83	61	79	75	67	90	81	88	91	6.1	110	3200	8	48	IP68	207
✓	**Apple** iPhone 15 Plus (256GB)	1849	78	82	82	73	80	74	74	60	71	82	91	6.7	248	4383	9	48	IP68	201
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 (512GB)	1849	77	86	81	61	77	75	63	60	69	81	91	6.1	504	3279	9	12	IP68	171
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 Plus (256GB)	1699	77	82	81	70	76	75	63	60	68	81	91	6.7	248	4323	9	12	IP68	203
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 Plus (512GB)	2049	77	86	81	70	76	75	63	60	68	81	91	6.7	504	4323	9	12	IP68	203
✓	**Apple** iPhone 15 (256GB)	1699	77	82	82	62	81	74	73	60	70	82	91	6.1	248	3349	8	48	IP68	171
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 (128GB)	1299	76	78	81	61	77	75	63	60	69	81	91	6.1	111	3279	9	12	IP68	171
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 (256GB)	1499	76	82	81	61	77	75	63	60	69	81	91	6.1	248	3279	9	12	IP68	171
✓	**Apple** iPhone 14 Plus (128GB)	1499	76	78	81	70	76	75	63	60	68	81	91	6.7	111	4323	9	12	IP68	203
✓	**Apple** iPhone 13 (256GB)	1299	75	78	81	61	75	63	63	60	67	81	91	6.1	245	3227	7	12	IP68	175
✓	**Apple** iPhone 13 (512GB)	1649	75	82	81	61	75	63	63	60	67	81	91	6.1	500	3227	7	12	IP68	175

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend phones with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 75% overall. **Price** RRP as of October 2024. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of display (15%), performance (15%), battery life (10%), main camera (10%), video quality (10%), music quality (5%), touchscreen (5%), selfie camera (5%), calling sound quality (5%), GPS (5%), ease of use (5%), durability (5%) and security and privacy (5%). **Available internal memory** indicates the available space to put photos, video and apps. * Figure shows the maximum main lens resolution. Additional lenses may operate at a lower resolution, where available. ■

Shop Ethical rating

NOTE: For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

BRAND	RATING
Apple	C
Samsung	F
Google	F



Say what?

THE SUMMER ISSUE

Modern translation devices have come a long way. **Elias Plastiras** and **Nigel Bowen** help break down the language barrier

Universal translation devices were once only a concept, found in episodes of *Doctor Who* or *Star Trek*, but today's devices are at least in the neighbourhood of those that were once sci-fi fantasy. And they can make worthwhile companions when you're travelling, or just out and about in the world trying to communicate with someone who speaks a different language to your own.

Translation technology has been around for a while, but for a long time the devices were both primitive, and prohibitively expensive. Thousands of 'Phraselators' designed to help military personnel translate a handful of English phrases into more than 40 languages were issued to American soldiers who served in Afghanistan and Iraq. The device reportedly cost US$2500 back in 2008, so it's no surprise it didn't exactly take off.

The technology has advanced considerably over the past decade – and come down in price. But, although many Australians are from non-English-speaking backgrounds or enjoy visiting countries where English is not widely spoken, the current generation of translation devices has received little attention. This is partly because, in the age of the smartphone, you likely already have some sort of translation device in your back pocket.

> **The free translation apps you can get with a smartphone outperformed the devices**

Why not just use your smartphone?

The translation apps you can get with a smartphone for free actually outperformed the translation devices we tested. But there are situations where having a discrete device that's battery-operated might well be preferable, such as in remote locations with patchy or non-existent Wi-Fi or mobile reception.

Which is why we tested the latest batch of translation devices alongside the free apps, so you can find one that translates phrases accurately and clearly across a range of languages (without being too much of a headache to set up and use). ▶

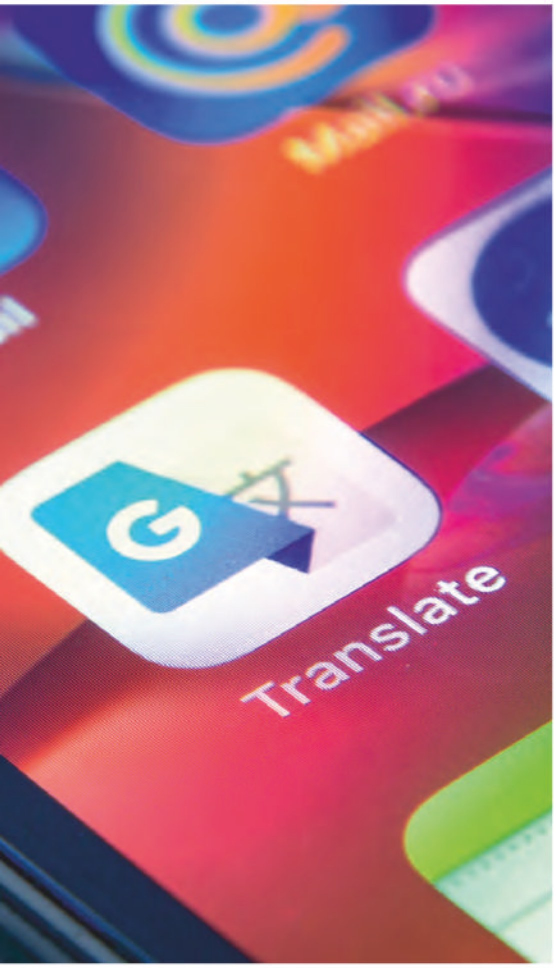
IMAGE: GETTY

How we choose what we test

We look for readily available translation devices that allow the user to translate one language to another in real time, and our priority is to test devices that you'll find in shops or prominently advertised in media, on TV or online.

For translation apps, we select the two most widely available for a mobile operating system at the time. Since conducting this test, Apple has released iOS 17, and with it the ability to enable the enhanced translation app via the phone's 'Action' button.

CHOICE tip: The devices in our test are for travelling purposes only. Professional, certified translators exist for important business or legal translations, and the ones we've looked at should not be relied upon for these situations.



How we test

We focus on conversational translations for travel, and use a selection of languages that are spoken and understood by the following CHOICE staff:

- Aurelien Calixte for French
- Audrey Lenain for French
- Deepa Prakash for Tamil
- Uta Mihm for German
- Scott O'Keefe for Japanese.

We assessed each device by playing recorded phrases through a speaker. The recordings were supplied by CHOICE staff in the following test languages: French, German, Japanese, and Tamil. The recordings were of the following set phrases:

- "How much is one piece of cake?"
- "Can you tell me which bus goes to the city?"
- "We are going out for drinks. Would you like to join us?"
- "Excuse me but I seem to be lost. Can you please help me?"
- "I am looking for somewhere to eat. Is there a restaurant close by that you recommend?"

TRANSLATING TO ENGLISH

If the device was able to produce an understandable English result from the test phrases, then it received a score of 80 (very good). The score was reduced depending on the number of attempts required to get a result that could be understood, and a score of 45 (poor) was given if the results could not be understood.

TRANSLATING FROM ENGLISH

The speakers of the supplied test languages provided feedback on the output from English to their language. Scores are based on their comments regarding the level of understanding, as well as any other factors such as speed and fluidity of the playback.

AUDIO QUALITY

We judged each device for its clarity, smoothness and accent. We used an Australian accent to judge the audio of each device when playing back English results of our test phrases. If Australian was not an option, we used a UK accent instead.

Devices that exhibited noticeable compression, distortion, sibilance, choppy or speedy playback or robotic-like output all scored lower than those that were clearer and smoother in their playback.

EASE OF USE

We also assessed how easy each device is to use by looking at the following aspects:

Device set-up: includes any set-up requirements and processes for connecting to the internet. We also look at the control buttons, the overall layout and labelling.

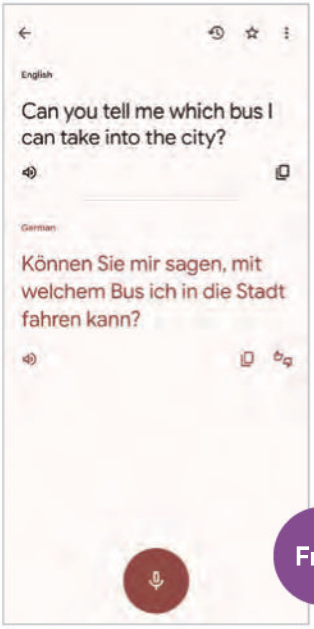
Charging and ports: covers how each device can be charged and the functions of any other present ports.

Language selection: includes an assessment on how easy it is to select an origin and target language.

Translation process: looks at the steps required to initiate a translation and then how the result is delivered.

Offline usage: whether the device can be used when the internet is unavailable, and if so, what you need to do to carry out translations.

Security: refers to any features that can lock the device and prevent its history from being viewed.



English

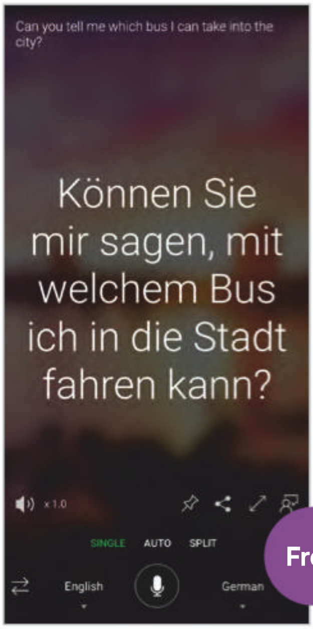
Can you tell me which bus I can take into the city?

German

Können Sie mir sagen, mit welchem Bus ich in die Stadt fahren kann?

Free

77%
Google Translate (App)



Can you tell me which bus I can take into the city?

Können Sie mir sagen, mit welchem Bus ich in die Stadt fahren kann?

Free

77%
Microsoft Translator (App)

If you are confident about being able to connect your phone to the internet at your destination, installing the **Google Translate** or the **Microsoft Translator** app is the logical choice. Both apps are free and will usually provide translations as good as or better than any offered by a translation device. The Google product is more popular than its Microsoft competitor, but they performed nearly identically in our test. Microsoft Translator comes with preloaded phrases, while Google Translate supports more languages.

			PERFORMANCE				SPECIFICATIONS												
Recommended		Price ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Accuracy score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Audio quality score (%)	Spoken languages (approx)	Offline languages available	Offline mode	Operates independently	App required	Connects to Wi-Fi	Preloaded phrases	SIM/eSIM	Bluetooth	Integrated battery	Charging interface	Weight (g)	Dimensions (mm, H x W x D)
✓	**Google** Translate (app)	Free	77	76	79	77	70	>100 (A) (B)	(D)		✓	na		na	na	na	na	na	na
✓	**Microsoft** Translator (app)	Free	77	75	79	77	45	39	(D)		✓	na	✓	na	na	na	na	na	na
	Translator T10	115	71	75	68	65	73	11 (A)	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	USB-C	94	132 x 51 x 13
	Timekettle Earbuds WT2 Edge	461	70	77	64	60	39	8	✓ (E)		✓				✓	✓	USB-C	52	56 x 56 x 27
	Timekettle Zero	77	70	72	69	65	39	8	✓ (E)		✓	✓	✓				na	7	18 x 40 x 7
	Vasco Translator M3	437	70	75	68	60	70	(C)	✓	✓		✓		S	✓	✓	USB-C	92	124 x 48 x 12
	Timekettle Fluentalk Portable Translator T1	461	68	70	74	55	38	8 (A)	✓	✓		✓	✓	S / e	✓	✓	USB-C	120	116 x 60 x 11
	Anfier AI Voice Translator W10	180	67	71	58	68	74	11	✓ (F)	✓		✓			✓	✓	microUSB	99	120 x 45 x 11
	Translator T8+	90	67	75	57	60	42	0			✓				✓	✓	microUSB	70	134 x 37 x 12

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend translation devices and apps with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 75%. **Price** as of October 2024. Pricing includes foreign exchange fees, except for the Timekettle devices. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of accuracy (50%), ease of use (30%) and audio quality (20%). **Accuracy score** was calculated with reference to how correctly the devices and apps translated five simple spoken questions from English into four different languages, and then from those languages translated the questions back to English. **Ease of use score** comprised set up (20%), controls (20%), language selection (20%), translation process (20%), charging/ports (10%), offline usage (5%) and security (5%). **Audio quality score** was determined by the clarity and smoothness of the translation provided by the device or app, and how natural it sounded. **Spoken languages** refers to the number of languages present in the device or app for translating speech. Note that devices and apps may translate a different number of languages in text form (image translation) and that there is ongoing debate over whether some languages are distinct languages or dialects. **Offline mode** refers to devices' and apps' capacity to use downloaded languages while not connected to the internet. **Offline languages available** is the number of languages that can be downloaded to use for translation in offline mode. **Operates independently** Can be used without being paired with a smartphone. **SIM/eSIM S** SIM, **e** eSIM. **(A)** Translations in offline mode were often inaccurate. **(B)** Not all of the downloadable languages support voice translation. **(C)** Includes a SIM card with free data for the life of the product and, as such, does not feature an offline mode. **(D)** Language packs can be downloaded, but they will only work for text translations when offline; speech will not work without an internet connection. **(E)** Requires offline language packs to be purchased. **(F)** Has an offline mode, but languages could not be downloaded during our test. **na** Not applicable. ■

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*Indicates a correction or clarification (see Checkout).

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RATING	KEY
A	Praises, no criticism
B	Some praise, no criticism
C	Praises, some criticism
D	Criticism, some praise
F	Criticisms

CHOICE
Eye spy
197 products TESTED
SALE
Get cosy
277 products TESTED
297 products TESTED
Time to shine
214 products TESTED
252 products TESTED
SHONKYS
248 products TESTED
Budget break
247 products TESTED

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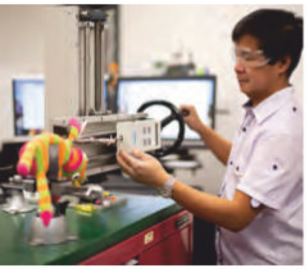
CHOICE



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See **choice.com.au/editorialguidelines**.

NEXT MONTH

Breakfast club

Toasters and kettles worth getting up for

IMAGES: GETTY

Switched on

The best electronic appliance stores, as voted by you

Separation anxiety

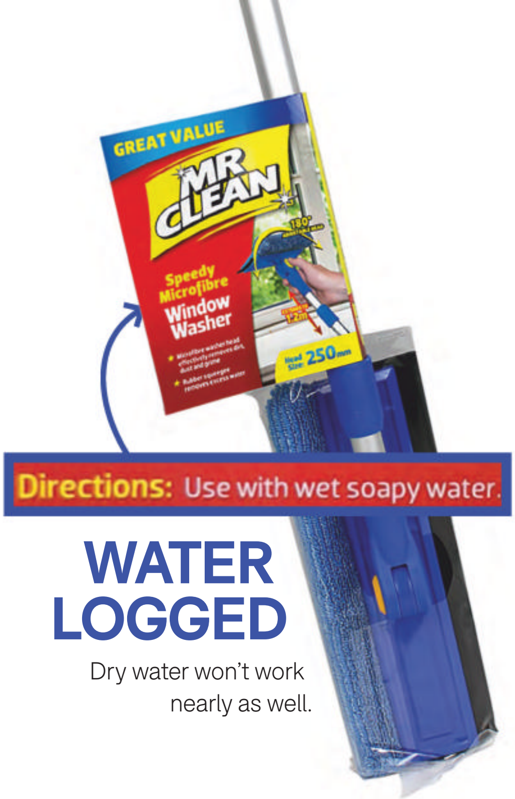
Pet monitors: Must-haves or major distractions?

Bulla
FROZEN YOGHURT
JUST

Out of reach

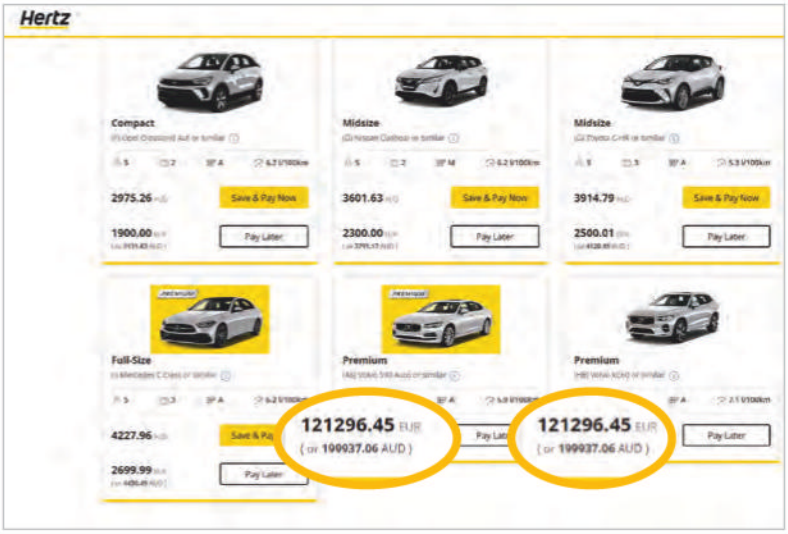
Our investigation into grocery prices in remote Australia

Plus Car insurance, hedge trimmers, wall ovens, barbecues & more


GREAT VALUE
MR CLEAN
Speedy Microfibre Window Washer
Head Size 250mm
Directions: Use with wet soapy water.

WATER LOGGED

Dry water won't work nearly as well.

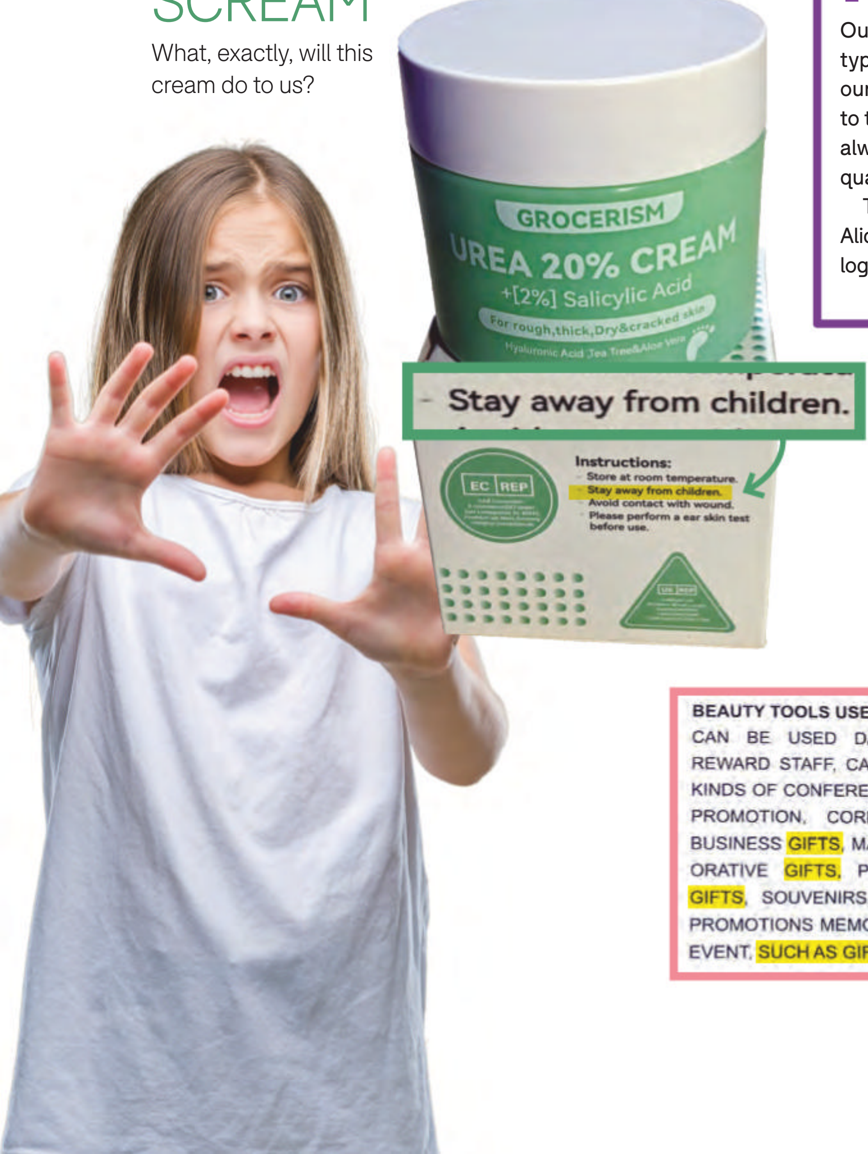

Hertz
Compact
2975.26
Save & Pay Now
1900.00
Pay Later
Midsize
3601.63
Save & Pay Now
2300.00
Pay Later
Midsize
3914.79
Save & Pay Now
2500.01
Pay Later
Full-Size
4227.96
2699.99
Pay Later
Premium
121296.45 EUR
(or 199937.06 AUD)
Premium
121296.45 EUR
(or 199937.06 AUD)
Pay Later

OUCH, THAT HERTZ

Might be cheaper to just buy a Volvo instead.

MOISTURISING SCREAM

What, exactly, will this cream do to us?


GROCERISM
UREA 20% CREAM
+[2%] Salicylic Acid
For rough,thick,Dry&cracked skin
Hyaluronic Acid Tea Tree&Aloe Vera
Stay away from children.
EC REP

Instructions:
- Store at room temperature.
- Stay away from children.
- Avoid contact with wound.
- Please perform a ear skin test before use.

HARD WORD

Our long-serving rogues' gallery of dodgy ads, toe-curling typos and misadventures in marketing, as sent in by you – our tickled, angered and bewildered readers. And thanks to the timeless shonkiness of so much advertising, you're always spoilt for choice – so keep 'em coming. Email high-quality unedited photos to hardword@choice.com.au.

This month, thanks go to Margaret Hudson (Gift hoarse), Alice Pragasam (Moisturising scream), Martin Turnbull (Water logged) and Yolanda van Vaardegem (Ouch, that Hertz).

Compiled by Daniel Wynne

GIFT HOARSE

OK we get it, these scissors would make a great gift.

BEAUTY TOOLS
FINE BEAUTY IMPLEMENTS
HIGH QUALITY

BEAUTY TOOLS USE:

CAN BE USED DAILY, TO SEND CUSTOMERS, REWARD STAFF, CAN DO HOLIDAY GIFTS FOR ALL KINDS OF CONFERENCE CELEBRATIONS, BUSINESS PROMOTION, CORPORATE IMAGE PROMOTION, BUSINESS GIFTS, MAJOR CELEBRATIONS COMMEMORATIVE GIFTS, PROMOTIONAL ITEMS CAN BE GIFTS, SOUVENIRS, OFFICE GIFTS, ADVERTISING PROMOTIONS MEMORIAL, THE IDEAL GIFT FOR THE EVENT, SUCH AS GIFTS.

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